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CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

THE MAIL

ETHICAL A.I.

Andrew Marantz's appraisal of two Silicon Valley camps that hold conflicting ideas about A.I.'s development—"doomers," who think it may spell disaster, and "effective accelerationists," who believe it will bring unprecedented abundance—offers a fascinating look at the factions that have dominated the recent discourse ("O.K., Doomer," March 18th). But readers should know that these two vocal cliques do not speak for the entire industry. Many in the A.I. and machine-learning worlds are working to advance technological progress safely, and do not suggest (or, for that matter, believe) that A.I. is going to lead society to either utopia or apocalypse.

These people include A.I. ethicists, who seek to mitigate harm that A.I. has caused or is poised to inflict. Ethicists focus on concrete technical problems, such as trying to create metrics to better define and evaluate fairness in a broad range of machine-learning tasks. They also critique damaging uses of A.I., including predictive policing (which uses data to forecast criminal activity) and school-dropout-warning algorithms, both of which have been shown to reflect racist biases. With this in mind, it can be frustrating to watch the doomers fixate on end-of-the-world scenarios while seeming to ignore less sensational harms that are already here.

Dan Turkel
Brooklyn, N.Y.

NEW CLASSICS

I read Emma Green's article about the classical-education movement—which advocates for primary- and secondary-school curricula based on the classics—with nostalgia and ambivalence ("Old School," March 18th). I attended a classical school in Austin, Texas, in the nineteen-nineties, and cherish the paradoxes of this formative episode. Studying Latin, logic, and grammar; practicing public speaking and dramatic performance; and, yes, memorizing lots of texts (including entire books of the Bible) developed my mind in ways that set me apart and served me well throughout my education, including in my graduate work. The school's science curriculum, however, began six thousand years ago.

Fortunately, the classical institution in Austin is not the only school I ever attended. I expect that most of its graduates remain believers, but, after I left, the evangelical and Western-chauvinist agendas I was taught there were the first things to fall away. Ironically, it was the school's own commitment to a single question, asked repeatedly in every course—"What does this reveal about the subject's world view?"—that prepared me to think critically about my educators' beliefs.

Elliot Cole
New York City

CARRYING THE FLAG

I was so glad to see that Maya Binyam, in her Profile of the writer Percival Everett, mentioned his short story "The Appropriation of Cultures," from his book "Damned if I Do" ("You Tell Me," March 18th). In that story, the main character inverts the meaning of the Confederate flag and causes it to lose its power in the eyes of the community until "one day it was not there." The character, who is Black, does this by buying a pickup truck emblazoned with a decal of the flag and driving around without removing it.

I often use this story in my graduate course about public administrative ethics, because I think it is a hopeful one. For future public servants—especially those living in communities, such as ours, in Gary, Indiana, that are facing challenges—this story encourages good stewardship.

Susan Zinner
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•

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GOINGS ON

APRIL 3 – 9, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

A prime offering in this year's "New Directors/New Films" series, playing April 3-14 at MOMA and Film at Lincoln Center, is the opening-night work, **"A Different Man,"** written and directed by Aaron Schimberg. It stars Sebastian Stan as a struggling New York-based actor whose career and social life are hindered by a medical condition that causes tumors on his face. His prospects brighten when he meets a friendly new neighbor (Renate Reinsve), a playwright; he undergoes an experimental treatment in hopes of a cure, and it changes more than his appearance. Further complications ensue when he encounters another actor (Adam Pearson) with the same condition. Schimberg's wide-ranging satirical film encompasses allegorical fantasy, anguished comedy, and harrowing melodrama of inner and outer identity.—*Richard Brody*

ABOUT TOWN

OFF BROADWAY | The remounting of Clubbed Thumb's Obie Award-winning play **"Grief Hotel"** is exquisitely weightless: Liza Birkenmeier's covertly romantic flotsam bobs along for a swift seventy minutes, funny and graceful, only occasionally indicating bleaker currents below. Aunt Bobbi (Susan Blommaert) talks to the audience as if we're in her marketing class—she proposes a hotel that caters to the traumatized—while her niece's friends and their lovers drily text and call one another about infidelity, loss, and death. The director, Tara Ahmadinejad, presides over a tremendous cast, including the mischievous spirits Nadine Malouf and Susannah Perkins. Even the pale, slice-of-room set design seems light as a blade of grass; it rests there diagonally, as if it has just blown into the Public and will be tossed away again by the next breeze.—*Helen Shaw (Public Theatre; through April 20.)*

DANCE | The repertory of the Dutch troupe **Nederlands Dans Theatre,** which was led for a quarter century by the choreographer Jiří Kylián, tends toward the hyper-abstract, the minimalist, and the monochrome. "The Point Being," by the brother-and-sister team Imre and Marne van Opstal—both former N.D.T. dancers—is a case in point: an exploration of synchronicity set within a mistily lit kinetic installation, by the Dutch design studio DRIFT; in it, dancers move through a chiaroscuro space like mysterious beings from another dimension. The company also brings William Forsythe's quartet "N.N.N.N.," from 2002, set mainly to the live sounds of the dancers' breath.—*Marina Harss (New York City Center; April 3-6.)*

ART | The most delightful thing about **Sonia Delaunay** may well have been her playing cards. At a new exhibition of her work, "Living Art," they are the brightest, most pulse-racingly colorful objects from an œuvre in which color is both the principal tool and the supreme ideal. Delaunay, born in 1885, borrowed from Cubism and Fauvism to find idiosyncratic ways of producing movement with complementary hues. The results of her experiments included paintings, but also dresses, curtains, furniture, and theatre sets. A proud democracy of color governs them all: there are no high or low art forms, just different ways of pleasing the eye. Delaunay was a rare species, an unfairly neglected artist who managed to live long enough to enjoy significant, belated acclaim. Let's keep it going.—*Jackson Arn (Bard Graduate Center; through July 7.)*

CLASSICAL | One thing that can make good piano playing so spellbinding is the auditory spectacle of an artist in conversation with themselves: left hand teases right, right wanders off, left interrupts and the two play on together. In a duet, that conversation is between two pianists, playing shoulder to shoulder at the same eighty-eight keys. Schubert, whose greatest pleasure was to make music with his friends, wrote more than sixty duets; **Mitsuko Uchida and Jonathan Biss,** both formidable soloists and, together, the directors of the Marlboro Music Festival (they must have plenty to say to each other), present a program of four of them, including the affectionate Rondo in A Major and the blithely exoticizing "Divertissement à la hongroise." Two hands good, four hands better?—*Fergus McIntosh (Carnegie Hall; April 9.)*

TROPICAL ELECTRO-CUMBIA | The singer and guitarist Fabi Reyna and the producer Nectali (Sumohair) Díaz—united as the duo **Reyna Tropical**—spent the past half decade tinkering with a sweeping, buoyant sound of the tropics. Their music was really coming into focus when Díaz died, in 2022, in the midst of work on their full-length début, "Malegría," leaving Reyna to finish in his wake. The album born of this transition considers our relationship to the earth and celebrates musical customs from Congo, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and beyond, reimagining the duo's influences to create a style that's both far-reaching and traditional. Bright moments draw out Reyna's wispy voice, and the rhythmic yet soothing songs of renewal wash over you like a cool mist.—*Sheldon Pearce (Public Records; April 6.)*

MOVIES | The four-film "Hong Kong in New York" series that's newly streaming on the Criterion Channel parses the experiences and ideals of émigrés from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, while also depicting American freedom as reckless frenzy. Clara Law's 1990 drama, **"Farewell China,"** stars Maggie Cheung as Hung, a Chinese woman who moves to New York in order to send money back to her husband, Nansan (Tony Leung Ka-fai), and their young son. Instead, she vanishes, and Nansan arrives in the city, undocumented, to search for her. Law tells the story freely and flamboyantly, with flashbacks and fantasies, following Nansan through a clandestine underworld that's as exploitative and violent as Hung's capitalist struggle is soullessly desperate.—*Richard Brody*

COURTESY A24

TABLES FOR TWO

HAAM

234 Union Ave., Brooklyn

I'm not sure what "healthy" really means, when it comes to describing food. Is it food that's low-calorie? Low-fat? Nutrient-dense? Minimally processed? As a matter of personal policy, I am skeptical of restaurants that foreground the concept. But there is nothing dutiful or diminished about the menu at HAAM—short for "healthy as a motha"—a Caribbean restaurant that opened in Williamsburg last fall. Take, for example, the kaleidoscopic riot of flavors in the Buss Up Shut Roti Plate. A paratha roti—the so-called busted-up shirt that gives this iconic Trinidadian dish its name—is piled on a large dish, surrounded by a vivid-orange swipe of earthy-sweet mashed pumpkin, a scoop of tender stewed greens, and a dollop of curry mango that's sharp enough to make every neuron in your brain fire at once.

The "motha" in question is the restaurant's chef-owner, Yesenia Ramdass, a mom of three from Washington Heights who grew up in an omnivorous Dominican American family but got into veganism as a teen. At HAAM—though the name is pronounced like the meat—she devotes herself to re-creating plant-based versions of both Dominican favorites and dishes from her husband's native Trinidad. The curry chicken on the Buss Up Shut plate, stewed and spicy and turmeric-yellow, is actually "chik'n," a meat substitute that almost perfectly mimics the texture of the real bird. The "shark" in her bake and shark, a Trinidadian flatbread sandwich, is banana blossom, spiced and deep-fried and strikingly reminiscent of the fried fish it replaces. The space is white-walled, with basket-cane lights and painted murals of tropical greenery. Even on a rainy day, it feels like sunshine is pouring in.

The restaurant keeps slightly bizarre hours, opening at 1 P.M. during the week—a little late for the lunch crowd—and closing most nights at nine. When I dropped in recently for an afternoon meal, a server suggested that I try the Chimichurri Chunk Steak, which is made with a soy-and-wheat-based faux beef. Seared until crusty outside and juicy within, it was marvellous and uncanny, especially under a drizzle of ultra-garlicky chimichurri. Ramdass first started HAAM as a pop-up, in 2020, and eventually landed a stand at Smorgasburg. Social-media-friendly snacks from the business's earlier incarnations are still available, such as a gorgeous mess of saucy fake meat piled onto a fried plantain sliced lengthwise, like a savory banana split. But a dine-in crowd allows Ramdass to explore flavors and presentations that are a little more refined. A ceviche appetizer is made with hearts of palm, whose brisk salinity and bouncy texture serve as a clever dupe for fish or shrimp. The dish is lime-bright, salty, and bracingly alive, especially if you add a few dashes of the fiery house-made hot sauce. It's a joy to eat—and, I suppose, it's healthy, by some definitions, if you care about that sort of thing. *(Dishes $10–$29.)*

—Helen Rosner

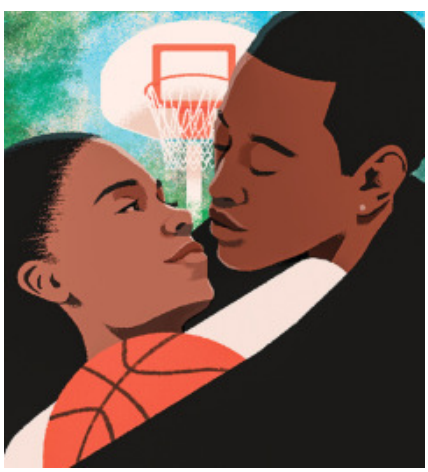
PICK THREE

The film critic Justin Chang shares current obsessions.

1. The ongoing furor over Jonathan Glazer's Oscars acceptance speech has brought only greater attention to his movie "The Zone of Interest," which rightly won the prize for Best International Feature. That work would form an exceptional double bill with Glazer's enigmatic 2014 thriller, **"Under the Skin"** (streaming on multiple platforms). Starring a never-better Scarlett Johansson as a come-hither alien, it is, like "Zone," a mesmerizing exploration of the empathy void, set to a demonically beautiful Mica Levi score that takes possession of your brain.

2. Years before "The Woman King" (2022), the director Gina Prince-Bythewood made a splendid feature début with the tender and kinetic 2000 coming-of-age romance **"Love and Basketball"** (streaming on Netflix). The movie wonderfully pairs Sanaa Lathan and Omar Epps, as childhood friends turned high-school and college sweethearts, chasing each other as well as their own dreams of basketball stardom. It's a classic, and a March Madness perennial.

3. The death of the great film scholar David Bordwell last month, at seventy-six, represents an incalculable loss to all of us who benefited from his brilliant, generously illuminating writing on cinema. As a mystery enthusiast, I've been savoring his final book, from 2023, **"Perplexing Plots: Popular Storytelling and the Poetics of Murder,"** a deeply researched dive into the history of crime fiction on the page and on the screen. It's a perfect capper to a career that revelled in the intricate, puzzle-like nature of film construction—the way that shots, cuts, sounds, and images clue us in to deeper patterns of meaning.



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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
BORDER CONTROL

Starting this spring, Donald Trump will be spending four days of every week in a Manhattan courtroom, leaving weekends for most of his campaign travel. Fortunately for him, the governor of the country's second-largest state has become a reliable surrogate. Greg Abbott, the Texas Republican, has been fighting the federal government since the early months of Joe Biden's Presidency. In some ways, he poses a more acute political problem for Biden than Trump does: Abbott is in charge of a border state at a time when the immigration issue may be the President's most glaring electoral vulnerability. A senior Administration official recently conceded that "Abbott has changed the immigration conversation in this country."

Lately, the number of people arriving at the border has declined from record highs earlier this winter. Yet Texas has radically escalated its confrontation with the Administration. A new state law, called SB-4, briefly went into effect on March 19th, before a federal injunction temporarily halted it. SB-4 would allow state officials to arrest any people they suspect of having crossed the border illegally, and, if they are undocumented, to deport them. The larger aim is to challenge the bedrock constitutional principle that the federal government, not the states, has the sole authority to enforce national immigration laws. There are many reasons that this has been (and should be) the case, not least of which is the rampant chaos of fifty states crafting their own rules and, as a result, interfering with U.S. foreign policy. The government of Mexico, for instance, has already said that it would refuse to accept deportations from Texas.

The law is only the latest example of Abbott's dramatic role on the national scene. In March, 2021, vowing that Texas would "not be an accomplice to the open border policies" of the new Administration, he announced Operation Lone Star, an immigration crackdown that has cost Texas ten billion dollars and led to tens of thousands of arrests. The following spring, he started busing migrants to Democratic cities; since then, the arrival of more than a hundred thousand people has overwhelmed local officials in Chicago, New York, and Denver. He has also tried to install impassable buoys in the Rio Grande and laid razor wire on U.S. soil to entangle migrants, forcing Border Patrol agents to cut them loose. (Both policies are being litigated in federal court.) "He's done a great job," Trump recently told Sean Hannity, who asked if Abbott was on the shortlist to be his Vice-President. "Absolutely, he is," Trump replied.

On February 29th, Trump and Biden were both in Texas, giving speeches on immigration. Trump, accompanied by Abbott, spoke in a public park in the city of Eagle Pass. Since early January, on orders from the Governor, the Texas National Guard has barred federal agents from a two-and-a-half-mile stretch of the border that includes the park. At one point, when Border Patrol agents learned that two migrants were stranded in the middle of the Rio Grande, they tried to use the park's boat ramp to access the river. A state guardsman turned them away. Those migrants were rescued by the Mexican government; the same day, however, according to a legal filing by the U.S. Solicitor General, a mother and her two young children drowned while trying to cross the river.

"This is like a war," Trump told Abbott, praising his efforts. Those attempting to enter the country, Trump added, "look like warriors to me." His message hasn't changed much since at least 2015. He continues to spew lies and invective, saying, most recently, that immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country." What's different now is his open alliance with Republican states that are willing to sabotage the federal government at his behest. Twenty-five governors have said they "stand with Texas" in its showdown against the Biden Administration. Many have offered to send their own state guardsmen to assist Abbott. One governor, Sarah Huckabee

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Sanders, who served in the Trump White House before returning to Arkansas, has said, "This is a fight that all of us have to engage in." Another, Ron DeSantis, has announced that Florida will now interdict Haitian migrants travelling by boat to the United States.

Biden has insisted that he would be tougher at the border, if only Republicans would let him. Last fall, when the Administration requested fourteen billion dollars from Congress for more resources to process people at the border, House Republicans refused. Their condition was a broader asylum reform—the kind of policy that, three years ago, top Democrats would have dismissed out of hand. But Abbott's busing scheme has increasingly alarmed members of the Party, some of whom openly criticized Biden for failing to do more. (Other Democratic city and state officials have privately told the White House that they're worried Abbott might target them next.) In response, Biden announced that he was perfectly willing to "shut down" the border and to curtail asylum. When a bipartisan deal emerged in the Senate, in February, Trump assailed it anyway. Predictably, the Republicans fell in line, abandoning their own lead negotiator. The asylum restrictions in the bill were unlikely to alter the over-all dynamic at the border, but the funding attached to them would have helped substantially with triage. Its failure gave the White House an opportunity to present Biden as a pragmatist thwarted by Republican cynicism. "Instead of playing politics with the issue, why don't we just get together and get it done," Biden said in Texas last month. "Join me," he told Trump. "Or I'll join you."

An appeals court will hear arguments on the legal merits of the SB-4 law in early April. However the judges rule, the case seems bound for the Supreme Court, which was apparently Abbott's goal all along. In 2012, the Court invalidated multiple provisions of a more modest Arizona law that gave local and state police the authority to ask for someone's immigration papers. On March 20th of this year, the solicitor general of Texas claimed, before an appeals court, that SB-4 did not violate the precedent set by the majority in 2012, and should therefore go into immediate effect. But, later that day, Abbott shared an ulterior motive with a crowd at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, in Austin. "We found ways to try to craft that law to be consistent with the dissent that was wrote [sic] in the Arizona case by Justice Scalia," Abbott said. His plain hope is that the current Court will be sympathetic to Scalia's reasoning. It's easy to write off Abbott's legal thinking as colossally flawed. But he clearly knows that court losses can often serve as political victories. The case will last through the election season, as designed.

—Jonathan Blitzer

AFTERMATH

FIND A GRAVE

Near the end of February, the overhead bins on flights from Ireland to the U.S. start filling up with fiddles and bouzoukis, as Irish traditional musicians make their seasonal migration across the Atlantic to play during what the players themselves sometimes call St. Patrick's Month. But toward April, in the aftermath of the parades, logistical constraints loosen. This was the case for three members of Dervish, a band from Ireland's County Sligo—and the reason they were able to finally take a day off from their thirtieth annual U.S. tour, to make a trip to an old cemetery in the Bronx, in search of the grave of Michael Coleman, a Sligo fiddler. Tom Morrow, Dervish's fiddler, was driving a rented Ford Explorer, and Liam Kelly, the flute player, was entering the address for St. Raymond's Cemetery into his G.P.S. Shane Mitchell, the accordion player, was in back remembering their first trip to the U.S., in 1994. "We used to buy maps," he said, "and we would plot out our journeys the night before."

As satellites guided them across Fifty-fifth Street, Mitchell recounted their first gig in New York, at the old Bottom Line. "We were with the Del McCoury Band," he said. "Super venue." An Irish festival in Chicago was their first full-on American Irish event—a shock. "We nearly got blind looking at as much green," Mitchell said. "We'd never have seen the likeness at home. We now know that it's part and parcel of the whole St. Patrick's Day thing over here."

They turned on to the Henry Hudson Parkway. "Where else did we go that time, Liam?" Mitchell asked.

"To be honest with you, I'd only be guessing," Kelly said.

Kelly was busy with his phone. The cemetery offices, he discovered, were closed, and the precise location of Coleman's grave was inscrutable. Texts were going out to other musicians for guidance, including one to Eamon O'Leary, a New York-based guitarist, who happened to be staying with Kevin Burke, an Irish fiddler based in Oregon. "We know Kevin," Mitchell said.

"I missed a tour of America for my daughter's birth, and we got Kevin to replace me, so that's how we know

Shane Mitchell, Liam Kelly, and Tom Morrow

Kevin," Morrow said. "And, even though Kevin's born in London, Kevin's people are Sligo people."

Burke, the players learned, had also visited St. Raymond's to search for Coleman's grave, in 1973. He was insufficiently dressed at the time, and after roaming the cemetery he gave up, cold and discouraged—only to realize that he was facing the grave of Paddy Killoran, another renowned Sligo fiddler.

On the Cross Bronx Expressway, Coleman's career was discussed. Born

in 1891 in Knockgrania, a rural district of Sligo, he sailed to the U.S. in 1914, working a vaudeville circuit. In the nineteen-twenties, he opened for jazz orchestras in Manhattan, fiddling with a rhythmic style that still echoes in the music of New York's traditional players. Coleman made eighty 78-r.p.m. recordings, many of which found their way back to Ireland; he is said to have revived the country's traditional-music playing, which for various reasons (emigration, the Catholic Church's disdain for dancing) was dormant. In Sligo, a memorial to Coleman, who died in 1945, reads "Master of the fiddle. Saviour of Irish traditional music."

The Explorer pulled off the Cross Bronx and into a hundred and eighty acres of gravestones. "Ah, there's just thousands of 'em," Kelly sighed. Through more texting (a piano player in Brooklyn, a flutist in Ballinaglera, County Leitrim, and a harmonicist in the Catskills), it was determined that they were standing in New St. Raymond's Cemetery, and Coleman was in the old one, just beyond the Bruckner and the Cross Bronx. Kelly was upbeat, having deciphered the plot numbers. "Maybe it'll be more apparent when we get there," he said.

As Morrow followed the G.P.S. through a knot of highway interchanges, he opined on Coleman's fiddling. "People spend their lifetimes trying to emulate him," he said.

In Old St. Raymond's, the Explorer's windows rolled down. "Section 21 should be ahead of us," Kelly said. "O.K., Row 29. We're walking from here."

It was cold and getting cloudier, the wind gusting over the Hutchinson Parkway's white noise. One far-off family tended a grave as the musicians walked quietly, inspecting stones. After ten minutes, Mitchell stopped and pointed down. "Michael Coleman," he said. The others arrived and stared. "We should have brought some cleaning stuff with us," Kelly said. He bent to clean the blackness from the stone. "We have to tell Kevin Burke how easy it was!"

"My God," Kelly went on. "What the hell was Kevin doing?" Then he said, "Let's play a tune!"

"Just for the sake," Mitchell said, "just to say we played for Michael Coleman." Instruments came out of the car, Morrow starting off with a reel called "Sligo Maid." Suddenly, his fiddle popped its tuning peg. "That's Coleman!" Kelly said. Tunes started up again as a plane departed LaGuardia.

Kelly smiled. "This is a big moment for us."

"It's practically spiritual," Mitchell said.

After a while, they packed up their instruments. Clouds had covered the sun. Mitchell put his hands in his pockets and shivered. "It's cold, lads," he said.

—Robert Sullivan

THE BOARDS
NUMBER OUR DAYS

David Van Taylor, a sixty-one-year-old documentary filmmaker ("Good Ol' Charles Schulz") who lives in Park Slope, returned recently to an old lunchtime haunt, the Peruvian-Chinese restaurant Flor de Mayo, on the Upper West Side. "I haven't been here in thirty years," he said. He ordered a soupy rice with chicken and a café con leche and looked around, taking it all in—noisy families, hulking fish tank, lack of the old maître d'station and its microphone. "I remember walking in here and my friend grabbing that microphone and singing, 'You ain't nothin' but a hound dog,' " Van Taylor said, appearing nostalgic. "It's unbelievable that this place still survives." In the late eighties and early nineties, Van Taylor lived nearby and frequented Flor de Mayo with friends, sometimes captured in photographs. He produced a laptop image of a Polaroid of himself there, in 1991, and posed with it. Onscreen: twenty-eight-year-old Van Taylor, bespectacled, dark-haired, and moody, with café con leche. Today: Van Taylor, bespectacled, balding, and beaming, with same.

David Van Taylor

The picture was taken by Van Taylor's late friend Jamie Livingston, a Manhattan cinematographer who took a Polaroid every day, from when he was a senior at Bard College, in 1979, until 1997, when he died, of cancer, on his forty-first birthday. He took only one each day—"He had kind of a Spidey sense for the right moment"—and stored the results, dated, in suitcases and a grapefruit box. The images are alternately beautiful, artful, mysterious, and mundane: twenty-somethings posing with clarinets or gargoyles, a woman sunbathing with the Twin Towers behind her, frolickers enjoying a naked summer at a lake. "Jamie was very skilled at and dedicated to hanging out," Van Taylor said. "There was something about him that was easy to connect to. He wasn't Mr. Patter or Mr. Gab, but there was a comfort—you know, 'Let me show you my experimental film about my trip to Italy to see the accordion-makers.'" Livingston's Polaroids also capture a particular New York moment, "especially lower Manhattan, a certain period—you know, Cindy Sherman, the West Side Highway, Art on the Beach, the Twin Towers, running into Kevin Bacon, that whole scene." After Livingston died, friends scanned the Polaroids, some sixty-seven hundred of them, and posted the collection online, where it amassed more than three hundred million views. The images have been featured in an exhibition, a book, and daily posts on Instagram; now, in April, they'll be sung about, in Van Taylor's new work, "Number Our Days: A Photographic Oratorio," at PAC NYC, at the World Trade Center, with music by Luna Pearl Woolf. The performance features Polaroid-shaped screens with projections, the countertenor John Holiday, and three choirs and an orchestra from Trinity Wall Street Choir.

To write the libretto, Van Taylor

interviewed friends in Livingston's photographs and strangers affected by them, and created characters who sing their words, such as the Seeker ("You can't always tell from the photo / Sometimes it was a pain in the ass"), the Curmudgeon ("A blurry photo of two stoned twenty-year-olds in Italy / I bought this box of spaghetti"), and the Curator ("Did we know what we had? . . . New York in those days . . . Grownups away"). The Inventor—who is inspired by Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid, "but also Steve Jobs, and a little Elon Musk thrown in"—sings of invention, technology, and revolutionizing human connection. Van Taylor and Woolf first collaborated on an opera about Bernie Madoff ("It was definitely a Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment—Oh, my God, I would so much rather write the libretto of an opera about Bernie Madoff than make a documentary about him"), but for "Number Our Days" Woolf suggested an oratorio instead of an opera, to emphasize community. That felt right, and in the libretto Van Taylor put the pieces together "in a shape that would tell a story about the bigger themes, loss and connection and memory."

Early on in writing the libretto, Van Taylor was telling his cantor ("Unrelated—my cantor went to high school with Prince") about the oratorio project, and she provided another "Aha!" moment. "She said, 'Oh, it's like Psalm 90'—allegedly the oldest psalm, written by Moses himself, about mortality and balancing the joys and the pains in life, and beseeching God. And the key line is 'Teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom.' Every time I say that, I get chills. Because that's what Jamie was doing."

—*Sarah Larson*

HOT DOG DEPT.
WORLD RECORD

Sports are full of records, and Reggie Duvalsaint is chasing one of his own: to become the first seat vender to work at all sixty Major League Baseball and National Football League stadiums. "If I do Fenway this year, there are only three baseball stadiums left," he explained between hot-dog sales recently. "The White Sox, Twins, and Toronto. That's going to be the toughest one, because you've gotta get a work visa. Which I've tried. Or marry a Canadian woman." (Which he hasn't.) He was at Petco Park, in San Diego, for a Chris Stapleton concert. He wore a Padres hat and a yellow shirt with brown sleeves, and he had three huge satchels slung across his shoulders.

Duvalsaint is a celebrated figure among seat venders, or hawkers—the guys shouting "Beer here!" at ballparks. He works six or seven days a week across the country, sometimes twice a day in different cities, like the Lou Gehrig of venders. The only N.F.L. stadium that he hasn't yet hit is the Minnesota Vikings'. "Seniority and unions," he said. "I'm knocking on that door actively." This week, he'll be at the Detroit Tigers' home opener at one, then fly to Atlanta for a Braves game at seven.

Before hawking, Duvalsaint, who is thirty-four, worked at HSBC in New York, in platform sales. In 2017, while visiting his parents near Miami, he wanted to catch the M.L.B. All-Star Game but balked at the ticket prices. Instead, he responded to a Craigslist ad for short-term help. "I don't remember my first hot dog sold, it was so quick," he said. "I made it about ten feet before I got swarmed." The pitchman Anthony Sullivan, from OxiClean's infomercials, also happened to be at the game. "He was walking around on the concourse and saw me selling," Duvalsaint said. "He said, 'You've got a great future in sales!' He even came into the seats and said, 'Let's push these hot dogs!'"

A month later, Duvalsaint quit banking. "People thought I was crazy," he said. High-end travelling hawkers can make six figures a year, but they tend to chase profit rather than completionism. "For me, the travel part is a mix between passion project and profitability," Duvalsaint said. He uses Frontier Airlines' six-hundred-dollar all-you-can-fly pass. In a pinch, he sleeps at the airport. He used to schedule Dead & Co. shows whenever possible, but the band stopped touring. "The crowd is super generous, they like to drink," he said.

In San Diego, Duvalsaint carried forty-eight water bottles (five dollars and fifty cents each), thirty hot dogs (nine dollars), and thirty churros (six-fifty) at a time. At a Dodgers-Giants series in San Francisco last year, he lugged a hundred and forty-four sixteen-ounce beers—nearly equivalent to carrying the Dodgers' center fielder Mookie Betts around his shoulders. "I practice yoga

"It's so hard to get a job as a white man with a terrible personality these days."

three to four times a week to maintain flexibility," he said.

His sales strategy is standard. "You go for the saltier items first, then later switch to sweet," he said. He passed a concession stand with a long queue. "Folks, hot dogs, churros, water, no line!" Soon he had his own line.

"I don't really have any shtick," he said. "There are a lot of guys who do. In Philly, we have a guy with a parrot on his shoulder." He finds that being friendly works best. At one concert, the singer Luke Combs noticed Duvalsaint working the floor. "After he finished a song, he goes, 'Hey, beer guy—you got a Miller Lite?' I said, 'Yeah, you want one?' He shotgunned it."

He headed for the floor and scanned the crowd while bellowing out his merchandise. A drizzle fell, but he wasn't fazed. "Sales are good when it's really hot or cold," he said. "When people are comfortable, it's kind of slow."

For the second opening act, Duvalsaint ascended to the upper deck. In one steep aisle, he sold everything he had. "When a few people buy, everybody buys," he explained. "Other fans just need to see that it's O.K." At a Phillies playoff game last year, one fan bought forty-five hundred dollars' worth of beer for his entire section.

It had been a great night so far. He'd sold about eighteen hundred dollars of goods. During the intermission, before Stapleton came on—prime selling time—the commissary ran out of hot dogs and churros, and Duvalsaint had to settle for cotton candy, without much success. "Not a cotton-candy crowd," he said. "If this was Taylor Swift . . ."

—Adam Elder

FREE SPEECH DEPT.

WORDPLAY

The Philadelphia punk band Mannequin Pussy got its name from an offhand joke that a friend made years ago, now lost to history. The group has always had certain appellative affinities. Two early demos, from 2011, were called "BonerJamz!" and "Meatslave." (Tracks have included "PissDrinker" and a waltz called "Clit Eastwood.") The band's four members were in town for a gig at Rough Trade recently. On their day off, they visited the Museum of Sex, to see the exhibit "Radical Perverts."

Before entering the gallery, a museum staffer asked them to sign injury-and-liability waivers for the show's interactive games. "I am extremely litigious, so this is great," Maxine Steen, the pink-haired guitarist, said. She wasn't entirely joking. Earlier this year, Mannequin Pussy was deemed obscene by Big Tech. "One day, I woke up and had a bunch of messages from people that were, like, 'Hey, um, your music's not on TikTok anymore?'" Marisa Dabice, the band's front person, said. She wore a leather duster coat with fur cuffs. After confirming that typing in the band's name yielded no results, she had a theory. "I type in 'Mannequin Cock' to see what's up," she said. "*Our* music came up!" She didn't stop there. "I type in 'Mannequin Dick.'" Same thing.

Steen shook her head. On TikTok, it was not hard to find such dude-penned classics as "Fela's Cock," "My Dick," or "Dick in a Box." "To be feminine is to be profane," Dabice said sadly.

At around the same time, if you asked an Amazon Alexa to play Mannequin Pussy, the device would shut down. Epitaph, the band's record label—whose offerings include Noam Chomsky's recorded lectures and NOFX's "Punk in Drublic"—contacted TikTok. ("I'm receiving a notice that the phrase 'may be associated with behavior or content that violates our guidelines,'" the label's legal counsel wrote.) TikTok backed down, and now Mannequin Pussy is back on the platform. "They reprogrammed their algorithms," Dabice said. "Now the only type of pussy that can be searched on TikTok is mannequin."

She was enchanted by a museum diorama titled "Iron Hole," part of a series called "Sex Lives of Robots." "That's one thing that people are worried about, right?" Dabice said. "That robots are going to be the only ones who get to make art in the future?"

The band had recently come under fire for using A.I. in a music video for the song "Nothing Like." (Among the dissenters, the YouTube user @TheEpicBunch12222 commented, "real punks respect copyright law.") Why did Mannequin Pussy do it? "I only had three thousand dollars and three weeks to make a video," Dabice said. "There's an alarmist reaction to what A.I. ultimately does mean, instead of simply as a tool in the hands of a creator." She went on, "It can be ethical and pleasurable and art."

They moved on to other works—a dildo belonging to Allen Ginsberg, a vitrine that displayed a leather whip. The gallery was also stocked with religious iconography. Dabice gazed at a Picasso etching of Raphael with his mistress, regarded by an unlikely voyeur. " 'The Pope savors the scene from his armchair,'" she read from a placard. She felt creatively affirmed. "Artists throughout history have understood that sex is part of our humanity," she said.

Mannequin Pussy's new album, "I Got Heaven," was rated an 8.8 by Pitchfork in its Best New Music listings. Dabice said that her idea of heaven was an oasis where "Weird Al" Yankovic performed an eternal residency.

Colins (Bear) Regisford, the band's bassist, said that, to him, heaven would be seeing Nirvana in its prime.

"And I could play drums, like, as loud as I want," the group's fourth member, Kaleen Reading, who wore a windbreaker, said. She went on, "My cats would live as long as I do. And, uh, I can kiss my girlfriend without having people looking at us."

"Synthesizers, lasers," Steen said.

"I want a bacchanal every night," Dabice said.

For the band, the question of language and profanity is of great importance. "When I sit down to write lyrics, I spend a lot of time really wavering over what those words are going to be," Dabice said. "They're not just magazine-flips through obscurity, stringing random words together. There's an intentional meaning that's been labored over, because there aren't that many moments in our life that we get to say something." She made a Delphic expression. "How often do we actually get to *say* something?"

She invoked the 1973 court case Miller v. California, which determined that a work is only considered obscene if it "lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." By that standard, she concluded, "we're artists."

—Holden Seidlitz

ANNALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

CRAZY-MAKING

Is gaslighting on the rise, or are you just imagining it?

BY LESLIE JAMISON

The philosopher Kate Abramson describes gaslighting as "existential silencing."

When Leah started dating her first serious boyfriend, as a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Ohio State, she had very little sense that sex was supposed to feel good. (Leah is not her real name.) In the small town in central Ohio where she grew up, sex ed was basically like the version she remembered from the movie "Mean Girls": "Don't have sex, because you will get pregnant and die."

With her college boyfriend, the sex was rough from the beginning. There was lots of choking and hitting; he would toss her around the bed "like a rag doll," she told me, and then assure her, "This is how everyone has sex." Because Leah had absorbed an understanding of sex in which the woman was supposed to be largely passive, she told herself that her role was to be "strong enough" to endure everything that felt painful and scary. When she was with other people, she found herself explaining away bruises and other marks on her body as the results of accidents. Once, she said to her boyfriend, "I guess you like it rough," and he said, "No, all women like it like this." And she thought, "O.K., then I guess I don't know shit about myself."

Her boyfriend was popular on campus. "If you brought up his name," she told me, "people would say, 'Oh, my God, I *love* that guy.'" This unanimous social endorsement made it harder for her to doubt anything he said. But, in private, she saw glimpses of a darker side—stray comments barbed with cruelty, a certain cunning. He never drank, and, though in public he cited vague life-style reasons, in private he told her that he loved being fully in control around other people as they unravelled, grew messy, came undone. Girls, especially.

Sometimes, when they were having sex, Leah would get a strong gut feeling that what was happening wasn't right. In these moments, she would feel overwhelmed by a self-protective impulse that drove her out of bed, naked and crying, to shut herself in the bathroom. What she remembers most clearly is not the fleeing, however, but the return: walking back to bed, still naked, and embarrassed about having "made a scene." When she got back, her boyfriend would tell her, "You have to get it together. Maybe you should see someone."

A few months after they broke up—not because of the sex but for "stupid normal relationship reasons"—Leah found herself chatting with a girl who was sitting next to her in a science lecture. It emerged that this girl had gone to the same high school as her ex, and when Leah asked if she knew him the girl looked horrified. "That guy's a psycho," she said. Leah had never heard anyone speak about him like this. The girl said that, in high school, he'd had a reputation for sexual assault. Some of what she described sounded eerily familiar. "The idea that he would want to have power over a girl while she was asleep was as easy for me to believe as the idea that he needed air to breathe," she said. "It reminded me of every sexual experience I had with him, where he had all of the power and I was only a vessel to accept it."

Leah went back to her dorm room and lay in bed for almost two days straight. She kept revisiting memories from the relationship, understanding them in a new way. Evidently, what she'd understood as "normal" sex had been something more aggressive. And her ex's attempts to convince her otherwise—implying that she was crazy for having any problem with it—were a kind of controlling behavior so fundamental that she did not have a name for it. Now, six years later, as a social worker at a university, she calls it "gaslighting."

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSIE NORTON

These days, it seems as if everyone's talking about gaslighting. In 2022, it was Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year, on the basis of a seventeen-hundred-and-forty-per-cent increase in searches for the term. In the past decade, the word and the concept have come to saturate the public sphere. In the run-up to the 2016 election, *Teen Vogue* ran a viral op-ed with the title "Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America." Its author, Lauren Duca, wrote, "He lied to us over and over again, then took all accusations of his falsehoods and spun them into evidence of bias." In 2020, the album "Gaslighter," by the Chicks (formerly known as the Dixie Chicks), débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* country chart, offering an indignant anthem on behalf of the gaslit: "Gaslighter, denier . . . you know exactly what you did on my boat." (What happened on the boat is revealed a few songs later: "And you can tell the girl who left her tights on my boat/That she can have you now.") The TV series "Gaslit" (2022) follows a socialite, played by Julia Roberts, who becomes a whistle-blower in the Watergate scandal, having previously been manipulated into thinking she had seen no wrongdoing. The *Harvard Business Review* has been publishing a steady stream of articles with titles like "What Should I Do if My Boss Is Gaslighting Me?"

The popularity of the term testifies to a widespread hunger to name a certain kind of harm. But what are the implications of diagnosing it everywhere? When I put out a call on X (formerly known as Twitter) for experiences of gaslighting, I immediately received a flood of responses, Leah's among them. The stories offered proof of the term's broad resonance, but they also suggested the ways in which it has effectively become an umbrella that shelters a wide variety of experiences under the same name. Webster's dictionary defines the term as "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator." Leah's own experience of gaslighting offers a quintessential example—coercive, long-term, and carried out by an intimate partner—but as a clinician she has witnessed the rise of the phrase with both relief and skepticism. Her current job gives her the chance to offer college students the language and the knowledge that she didn't have at their age. "I love consent education," she told me. "I wish someone had told me it was O.K. to say no." But she also sees the word "gaslighting" as being used so broadly that it has begun to lose its meaning. "It's not just disagreement," she said. It's something much more invasive: the gaslighter "scoops out what you know to be true and replaces it with something else."

The term "gaslighting" comes from the title of George Cukor's film "Gaslight," from 1944, a noirish drama that tracks the psychological trickery of a man, Gregory, who spends every night searching for a set of lost jewels in the attic of a town house he shares with his wife, Paula, played by Ingrid Bergman. (The jewels are her inheritance, and we come to understand that he has married her in order to steal them.) Based on Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play of the same name, the film is set in London in the eighteen-eighties, which gives rise to its crucial dramatic trick: during his nighttime rummaging, Gregory turns on the gas lamps in the attic, causing all the other lamps in the house to flicker. But, when Paula wonders why they are flickering, he convinces her that she must have imagined it. Filmed in black-and-white, with interior shots full of shadows and exterior shots full of swirling London fog, the film offers a clever inversion of the primal trope of light as a symbol of knowledge. Here, light becomes an agent of confusion and deception, an emblem of Gregory's manipulation.

Gregory gradually makes Paula doubt herself in every way imaginable. He convinces her that she has stolen his watch and hidden one of their paintings, and that she is too fragile and unwell to appear in public. When Paula reads a novel by the fire, she can't even focus on the words; all she can hear is Gregory's voice inside her head. The house in which she is now confined becomes a physical manifestation of the claustrophobia of gaslighting and the ways in which it can feel like being trapped inside another person's narrative—dimly aware of a world outside but lacking any idea of how to reach it.

The first recorded use of "gaslight" as a verb is from 1961, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and its first mention in clinical literature came in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, in a 1969 article titled "The Gas-Light Phenomenon." Written by two British doctors, the article summarizes the plot of the original play and then examines three real-life cases in which something similar occurred. Two of the cases feature devious wives, flipping the gender dynamic usually assumed today; in one, a woman tried to convince her husband that he was insane, so that he would be committed to a mental hospital and she could divorce him without penalty. The article is ultimately less concerned with gaslighting itself than with safeguards around admitting patients to mental hospitals. The actual psychology of gaslighting emerged as an object of study a decade later. The authors of a 1981 article in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* interpreted it as a version of a phenomenon known as "projective identification," in which a person projects onto someone else some part of himself that he finds intolerable. Gaslighting involves a "special kind of 'transfer,'" they write, in which the victimizer, "disavowing his or her own mental disturbance, tries to make the victim feel he or she is going crazy, and the victim more or less complies."

On its way from niche clinical concept to ubiquitous cultural diagnosis, gaslighting has, of course, passed through the realm of pop psychology. In the 2007 book "The Gaslight Effect," the psychotherapist Robin Stern mines the metaphor to the fullest, advising her readers to "Turn Up Your Gaslight Radar," "Develop Your Own 'Gaslight Barometer,'" and "Gasproof Your Life." Stern anchors the phenomenon in a relationship pattern that she noticed during her twenty years of therapeutic work: "Confident, high-achieving women were being caught in demoralizing, destructive, and bewildering relationships" that in each case caused the woman "to question her own sense of reality." Stern offers a series of taxonomies for the stages (Disbelief, Defense, Depression) and the perpetrators (Glamour Gaslighters, Good-Guy Gaslighters, and Intimidators). She understands gaslighting as a

dynamic that "plays on our worst fears, our most anxious thoughts, our deepest wishes to be understood, appreciated, and loved."

In the past decade, philosophy has turned its gaze to the phenomenon, too. In 2014, Kate Abramson, a philosophy professor at the University of Indiana, published an essay called "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting," which she has now expanded into a rigorous and passionately argued book-length study, "On Gaslighting." Early in the book, she describes giving talks and having conversations about gaslighting in the decade since publishing her original article: "I still remember the sense of revelation I had when first introduced to the notion of gaslighting. I've now seen that look of stunned discovery on a great many faces."

The core of Abramson's argument is that gaslighting is an act of grievous moral wrongdoing which inflicts "a kind of existential silencing." "Agreement isn't the endpoint of successful gaslighting," she writes. "Gaslighters aim to fundamentally undermine their targets as deliberators and moral agents." Abramson catalogues the ways in which gaslighters leverage their authority, cultivating isolation in the victim and leaning on social tropes (for example, the "hysterical woman") to achieve their aims. Outlining the various forms of suffering that gaslighting causes, Abramson stresses the tautological bind in which it places the victim—"charging someone not simply with being wrong or mistaken, but being in no condition to judge whether she is wrong or mistaken." Gaslighting essentially turns its targets against themselves, she writes, by harnessing "the very same capacities through which we create lives that have meaning to us as individuals," such as the capacities to love, to trust, to empathize with others, and to recognize the fallibility of our perceptions and beliefs. This last point has always struck me as one of gaslighting's keenest betrayals: it takes what is essentially an ethically productive form of humility, the awareness that one might be wrong, and turns it into a liability. Any argument in which two people remember the same thing in different ways can feel like a terrible game of chicken: the "winner" of the argument is the one less willing to doubt their own memories—arguably the more flawed moral position—whereas the one who swerves first looks weaker but is often driven by a more conscientious commitment to self-doubt.

Being a philosopher, Abramson spends a good deal of time defining the phenomenon by specifying what it isn't. Gaslighting is not the same as brainwashing, for example, because it involves not simply convincing someone of something that isn't true but, rather, convincing that person to distrust their own capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood. It is also not the same as guilt-tripping, because someone can be aware of being guilt-tripped while still effectively being guilt-tripped. At the same time—and although Abramson recognizes that "concept creep" threatens to dilute the meaning and the utility of the term—her own examples of gaslighting sometimes grow uncomfortably expansive. (And her decision to use male pronouns for gaslighters and female pronouns for the gaslit also reinforces a reductive notion of its gender patterns.) Both the book and her original essay open with a list of more than a dozen "things gaslighters say," ranging from "Don't be so sensitive" to "If you're going to be like this, I can't talk to you" to "I'm worried; I think you're not well." It's hard to imagine a person who hasn't heard at least one of these. The quotations function as a kind of net, drawing readers into the force field of the book's argument with an implicit suggestion: Perhaps this has happened to you.

"Run it by the legal department—but don't let them see you."

Growing up in Bangladesh as the daughter of two literature professors, a woman I'll call Adaya often had difficulty understanding what other people were saying. She felt stupid because it seemed so much harder for her to comprehend things others understood easily, but over time she began to suspect that her hearing was physically impaired. Her parents told her that she was just seeking attention, and when they finally took her to the family doctor he confirmed that her hearing was fine. She was just exaggerating, he said, as teen-age girls are prone to do.

Adaya believed what her parents had said, though she kept encountering situ-

ations where she couldn't hear things. It wasn't until her mid-thirties, in 2011, that she finally went to see another specialist. This was in Iowa, where she'd moved for a graduate program in writing after her first marriage, in Bangladesh, fell apart. The clinician told her that her middle-ear bone was calcifying; it was a congenital problem that had almost certainly affected her hearing for at least twenty-five years. Waiting for a bus home from the hospital—in the middle of winter, with a foot of snow all around her—Adaya called her mother to tell her. She responded without apology ("You're old enough to take care of yourself, so take care of yourself"), and let another six years pass before casually disclosing that the family doctor *had* found something wrong with Adaya's hearing, all those years before. When Adaya asked why they had kept this from her, her mother replied, "I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want you to be weak about it."

Of all the people who approached me on X with testimonies of gaslighting, I found Adaya and her story particularly compelling because her diagnosis eventually offered her a kind of irrefutable confirmation—something the gaslit crave, but often never receive—that allowed her to confront the dynamic directly. For Adaya, the damage of her parents' deception went beyond the hardships of her medical condition. "It made me feel that what I was experiencing in my body was not real," she told me. "All my life I was told I was lying and exaggerating. . . . In those years when my sense of self was being formed, I was being given a deficient version of myself." It was part of a broader pattern. From an early age, Adaya told me, she felt that she didn't fit in with her family without quite knowing why. Eventually, she realized that this sense of falling short had arisen from things her mother said. She thought of herself as ugly because her mother said so, disparaging her dark skin; when she got a skin infection, she was made to believe it was because she didn't keep herself clean enough. "If your mother cannot see the grace and beauty in you, who can?" Adaya said. That sense of shame and worthlessness propelled her toward an abusive marriage ("The first boy who told me I was worth loving, I moved toward him") and kept her in it for years.

The idea of gaslighting first began to resonate with Adaya when she finally went to therapy, in her forties. She had gone in order to understand the dynamics of her failed marriage, but came to see that the problems went deeper. As she wrote in one of her first messages to me, she found it easier to talk about surviving domestic violence than about the emotional violence she experienced in her childhood. The things her mother had said about her "dislodged and disoriented and to some extent destroyed my sense of self." Adaya has come to divide her life into three parts: her youth, when she believed in the version of herself shaped by her mother's narrative; the period of adulthood when the hearing diagnosis caused her to wrestle with that narrative; and the current era, in which she has a stronger self-conception and is in a stable romantic relationship. She was able to arrive at this point in part because her therapist helped her identify her relationship with her parents as one of gaslighting. Looking back on herself when she was young, she says, "I almost feel like it's a different person—like she is my child, and I want to take care of her."

The psychoanalyst and historian Ben Kafka, who is working on a book about how other people drive us crazy, told me that he thinks our most familiar tropes about gaslighting are slightly misleading. He believes that, although romantic relationships dominate our cultural narratives of gaslighting, the parent-child dynamic is a far more useful frame. When I visited Kafka in the cozy Greenwich Village office where he sees his patients, he pointed out that, for one thing, the power imbalance between parents and their children is intrinsically conducive to this form of manipulation. Indeed, it often happens unwittingly: if a child receives her version of reality from her parents, then she may feel that she has to consent to it as a way to insure that she continues to be loved and cared for. (And what other sense of reality do we have at first, besides what our parents tell us to be true?) Additionally, gaslighting later in life almost always involves some degree of infantilization and regression, insofar as it creates an enforced dependence. Lastly, and crucially, Kafka's orientation toward parent-child

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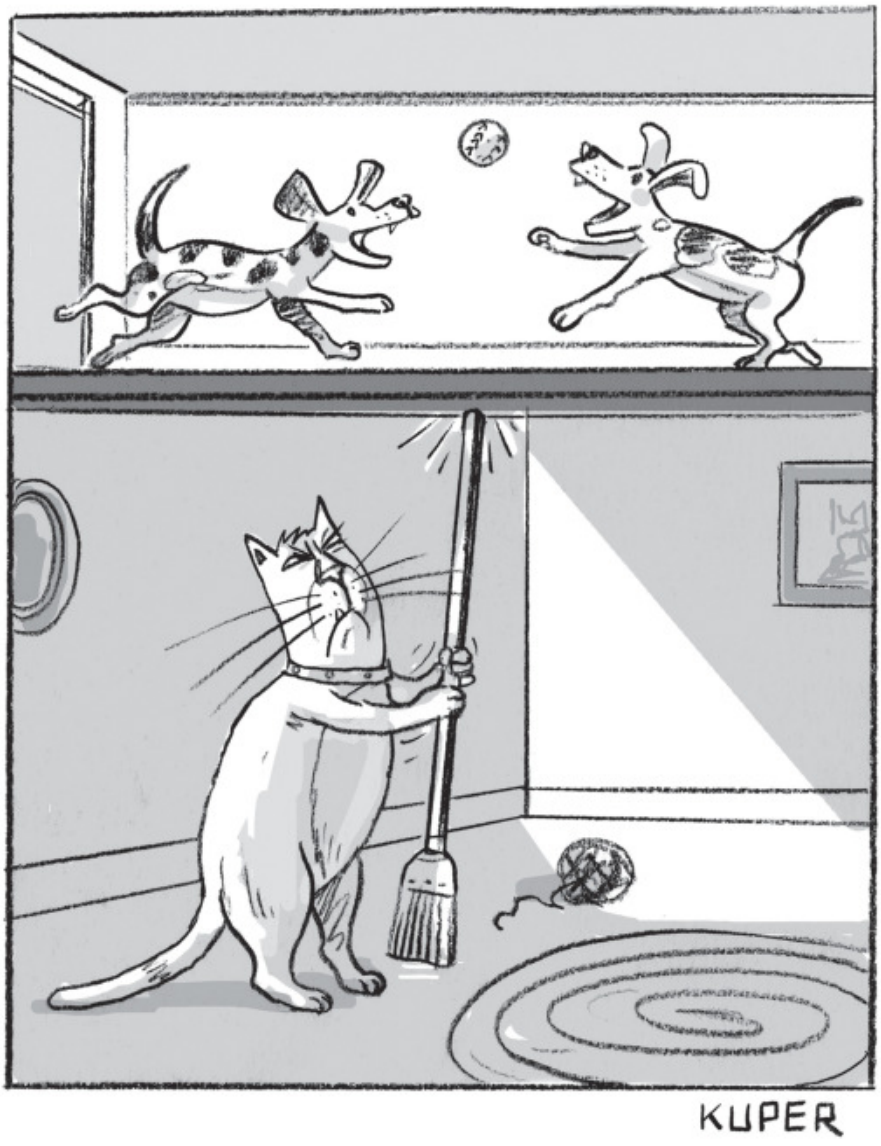

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bonds stems from an essentially Freudian belief that the dynamics at play in our adult relationships can usually be traced back to those we grew familiar with in childhood.

There are many memoirs that recount experiences one might call gaslighting—indeed, the very act of writing personal narrative often involves an attempt to "reclaim" a story that's already been told another way—but few trace the lasting residue of parental gaslighting as deftly as Lily Dunn's "Sins of My Father." When Dunn was six, her father left the family to join a cult who called themselves the sannyasins and preached a doctrine of radical emotional autonomy. At thirteen, Dunn went to spend the summer at her father's villa, in Tuscany, where he lived with a much younger wife (they'd got together when he was thirty-seven and she was eighteen) and a rotating crew of fellow cult members. In the entrancing but unsettling paradise of the villa—with its marble floors and grand staircases, shoddy electricity, and plentiful vats of wine—one of her father's middle-aged friends began trying to seduce her. After kissing her in the kitchen, his skin leathery and his breath stale from cigarette smoke, he whispered, "I want to have sex with you," and invited her back to his camper van to listen to his poems.

When Dunn told her father how anxious these sexual advances made her, he replied that she shouldn't be worried. "You could learn something," he told her. "He's a good man. He'll be gentle." (He changed his mind once he learned that his friend had gonorrhea.) For Dunn, her father's failure to affirm her sense of being preyed upon was far more damaging than the other man's predation. Years later, whenever she asked her father to acknowledge that his behaviors had affected her, he would gaslight her even more. Echoing the teachings of his sannyasin guru, he acted as if it were inappropriate for her to blame him for any emotional damage: " 'You can choose how you feel,' he said, again and again. 'It has nothing to do with me.' "

For years after that incident, Dunn told me, "I could never trust that what I was feeling was quite right," because she'd been consistently told by her father that she felt too much, and that she needed to deal with these feelings on her own rather than foisting them onto others. At fifteen, she began her first serious romantic relationship, with a much older man (he was thirty-two), and found it almost impossible to trust her suspicions about him. Looking back, it's clear to her that he was living with his female partner, but he said that the woman was just a roommate, and Dunn didn't have the confidence to disbelieve him. Instead, she told me, she got lost in obsessive thought patterns, trying to figure out whether this man was lying or if she was being paranoid; she couldn't concentrate properly because she was so consumed by this circular thinking. "I thought I had to work it out myself," she said. Looking back, she sees herself frantically trying to play two roles at once: she was the anxious child, who knew something was wrong but couldn't figure out what, *and* the adult who was attempting—but not yet able—to take care of things, to make them right.

Sitting in Kafka's office thinking of Dunn and Adaya, I found myself swelling with indignation on behalf of these gaslit children, taught to feel responsible for the pain their parents had caused them. But beneath that indignation lurked something else—a nagging anxiety coaxed into sharper visibility by the therapeutic aura of Kafka's sleek analytic couch. I eventually told him that, as I worked on this piece, I had started to wonder about the ways I might be unintentionally gaslighting my daughter—telling her that she is "just fine" when she clearly isn't, or giving her a

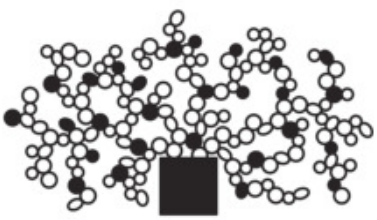
hard time for making us late for school by demanding to wear a different pair of tights, when it is clearly my own fault for not starting our morning routine ten minutes earlier. In these interactions, I can see the distinct mechanisms of gaslighting at work, albeit in a much milder form: taking a difficult feeling—my latent sense of culpability whenever she is unhappy, or my guilt for running behind schedule—and placing it onto her. Part of me hoped that Kafka would disagree with me, but instead he started nodding vehemently. "Yes!" he said. "Within a two-block range of any elementary school, just before the bell rings, you can find countless parents gaslighting their children, off-loading their anxiety."

We both laughed. In the moment, this jolt of recognition seemed incidental, a brief diversion into daily life as we crawled through the darker trenches of human manipulation. But, after I'd left Kafka's office, it started to feel like a crucial acknowledgment: that gaslighting is neither as exotic nor as categorically distinct as we'd like to believe.

Gila Ashtor, a psychoanalyst and a professor at Columbia University, told me she often sees patients experience a profound sense of relief when it occurs to them that they may have been gaslit. As she put it, "It's like light at the end of the tunnel." But Ashtor worries that such relief may be deceptive, in that it risks effacing the particular (often unconscious) reasons they may have been drawn to the dynamic. Ashtor defines gaslighting as "the voluntary relinquishing of one's narrative to another person," and the word "voluntary" is crucial—that's what makes it a dynamic rather than just a unilateral act of violence. For Ashtor, it's not a question of blaming the victim but of examining their susceptibility: what makes someone ready to accept another person's narrative of their own experience? What might they have been seeking?

In addition to working as a psychoanalyst, Ashtor has studied and taught in Columbia's M.F.A. program in creative nonfiction (where I also teach), and she thinks a lot about the connections between gaslighting and personal narrative. I asked her how patients tend to narrate their gaslighting experiences: how often they come to her with the idea already in their minds, and how often she is the one to bring it up. Ashtor said that, if she introduces the term, she tries to use it as a placeholder, a first step in figuring out what was at play in a relationship. When patients introduce it—and sometimes she can sense a patient *wanting* her to use it first—she may be skeptical, not because they are wrong but because they usually haven't fully reckoned with their own role in the dynamic yet. It's as if they are trying to close something by invoking the word—to mark it as settled, figured out—whereas she wants to open it up. Ashtor says it frequently becomes clear that patients are very attached to the term "gaslighting," and fear something will be taken away from them if she disputes it. The question of what would be taken away is an illuminating one, and it raises an even trickier question: what did the dynamic give them in the first place?

The issue of susceptibility gets thorny quickly; it can appear to veer dangerously close to victim-blaming. Ashtor doesn't believe in the old psychoanalytic idea that everything that happens to us is somehow desired, but she does think that it's worthwhile to investigate why people find themselves in certain toxic dynamics. Without discounting the genuine suffering involved, she finds it useful to ask what her patients were seeking. Ashtor wondered aloud to me whether there could be something



"good" about gaslighting, and why it feels so transgressive even to suggest that this might be the case. "There's a real appeal in adopting someone else's view of the world and escaping our own," she told me. "There are very few acceptable outlets in our lives for this hunger for difference."

Ashtor thinks that therapeutic examination of a gaslighting dynamic can bring you closer to understanding something crucial about yourself: a complicated relationship to motherhood, say, or the effects of certain imbalances or conflicts in your parents' marriage. The work is to "understand what's getting enacted and why." One doesn't necessarily emerge from this type of examination with a self that is entirely "cured" or integrated, but it can, as she says, allow one to "live in closer proximity to the questions and struggles that animate the self." In working with patients to better understand their experiences of being gaslit, Ashtor is hoping to give them a different way to engage with the impulses that led them there.

Although most accounts of gaslighting focus on interpersonal dynamics, Pragya Agarwal, a behavioral scientist and a writer based between Ireland and the U.K., believes that it's more useful to consider the phenomenon from a sociological perspective. "People who have less power because of their status in society, whether it be gender, race, class, and so on, are more susceptible to being gaslighted," she told me. "Their inferior status is used as leverage to invalidate their experiences and testimonies." She spoke of instances in medicine in which genuinely ill patients are repeatedly told that their symptoms are psychosomatic. Endometriosis, for example, is an underdiagnosed condition, she said, because women's pain is often discounted. Similarly, in the workplace, minorities who report microaggressions may be told that they are being "too sensitive" or that the offending colleague "didn't mean it like that."

In this view of gaslighting, it becomes harder to see the utility of susceptibility as a framing concept. When I asked Agarwal about what role the gaslit party might play in the dynamic, she replied, "I don't believe that it is the responsibility of the oppressed to create conditions where they wouldn't be oppressed."

What does the gaslighter want? In the 1944 film, the gaslighter's motivation (to steal Paula's jewels) is so cartoonishly superficial that it seems like a stand-in for something larger—a metaphor for the desire to undermine a woman's self-confidence, perhaps, in order to keep her dependent. In real life, casting the gaslighter as a two-dimensional villain seems insufficient, another way of avoiding

a reckoning with complicity and desire.

The question of the gaslighter's motivation often becomes a chicken-or-egg dilemma: whether their impulse to destabilize another person's sense of reality stems primarily from wanting to harm that person or from wanting to corroborate their own truth. Think of the college boyfriend who convinces his girlfriend that all sex involves violence—is his fundamental investment in controlling her or in somehow justifying his own desires? Abramson writes that both goals can be at play simultaneously, such that a gaslighter may be "trying to radically undermine his target" and also, "in a perfectly ordinary way, trying to tell himself a story about why there's nothing that happened with which he needs to deal." (Indeed, as she points out, gaslighters "are often not *consciously* trying to drive their targets crazy," so they may not always be self-aware enough to distinguish between these reasons.) If the need to affirm one's own version of reality is pretty much universal, it makes sense that a desire to attack someone else's competing version is universal, too. Yet, in the popular discourse, it can seem as if everyone has been gaslit but no one will admit to doing the gaslighting.

Kristin Dombek, in her 2014 book, "The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism," discusses how narcissism, once solely a clinical diagnosis, became an all-purpose buzzword. In her view, we hurl the accusation of pathological selfishness at others as a way of making sense of the feeling of being ignored or slighted. Gaslighting is not a clinical diagnosis, but, as with narcissism, less precise applications of the term can be a way to take an inevitable source of pain—the fact of disagreement, or the fact that we are not the center of other people's lives—and turn it into an act of wrongdoing. This is not to say that narcissism or gaslighting don't exist, but that, in seeing them everywhere, we risk not just diluting the concepts but also attributing natural human friction to the malevolence of others. Although "gaslighting" is a term that many members of Gen Z have grown up with, one teenager I know expresses its perils in this vein succinctly: "Every time someone gets criticized or called out, they just say, 'Oh, you're gaslighting me,' and it makes the other person the bad guy."

It doesn't help that the accusation is essentially unanswerable: "No, I'm not" is exactly what a gaslighter would say. Even a third party who disputes someone's account of being gaslit is threatening to inflict the same harm as the gaslighter. No wonder the issue of proof is crucial in many accounts of gaslighting: the tights on the boat, the charts that show decades of hearing loss, the other women who were assaulted. These are empirical life preservers that pull us out of the epistemic whirlpool. In proving that our past perceptions were correct after all, they also seem to guarantee that we are correct now in our feeling of having been hurt.

Such certainty is possible only in retrospect, however. Inside the experience of gaslighting, Abramson writes, "the gaslit find themselves tossed between trust and distrust, unstably occupying a world between the two." Which is to say, the more adamant you are that you're being gaslit, the more probable it is that you're not. On Reddit, a man laments, "My last GF loved to tell me I was 'gaslighting' her every time I simply had a different opinion than hers. Infuriating." Has he been gaslit into thinking he's a gaslighter?

Part of the tremendously broad traction of the concept, I suspect, has to do with the fact that gaslighting is adjacent to so many common relationship dynamics: not only disagreeing on a shared version of reality but feeling that you are in a contest over which version prevails. It would be nearly impossible to find someone who hasn't experienced the pain and frustration—utterly ordinary, but often unbearable—that comes when your own sense of reality diverges from someone else's. Because this gap can feel so maddening and wounding, it can be a relief to attribute it to villainy.

At the climax of Cukor's film, Paula confronts her husband with the truth of his manipulations. (He has been tied to a chair by a helpful detective. She is brandishing a knife.) He doubles down on his old tricks, trying to convince her that she has misinterpreted the evidence and should cut him free. But Paula turns his own game against him: "Are you suggesting that this is a knife I hold in my hand? Have you gone mad, my husband?" In a further twist, she inhabits the role of madwoman as a repurposed costume:

> How can a madwoman help her husband to escape? . . . If I were not mad, I could have helped you. . . . But because I am mad, I hate you. Because I am mad, I have betrayed you. And because I'm mad, I'm rejoicing in my heart, without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!

On its surface, this final scene offers us a clear, happy ending. The gaslit party triumphs and objective truth prevails. But deeper down it gestures toward a more complex vision of gaslighting: as a reciprocal exchange in which both parties take turns as gaslit and gaslighter. This is a version of gaslighting that psychoanalysis is more congenial to. In the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* article from 1981, the authors describe a "gaslighting partnership" whose participants may "oscillate" between roles: "Not infrequently, each of the participants is convinced that he or she is the victim."

In this sense, gaslighting is both more and less common than we think. Extreme cases undoubtedly occur, and deserve recognition as such, but to understand the phenomenon exclusively in light of these dire examples allows us to avoid the more uncomfortable notion that something similar takes place in many intimate relationships. One doesn't have to dilute the definition of gaslighting to recognize that it happens on many scales, from extremely toxic to undeniably commonplace.

Ben Kafka told me that he thinks one of the key insights of psychoanalysis is that people respond to anxiety by dividing the world into good and bad, a tendency known as "splitting." It strikes me that some version of this splitting is at play not only in gaslighting itself—taking an undesirable "bad" emotion or quality and projecting it onto someone else, so that the self can remain "good"—but also in the widespread invocation of the term, the impulse to split the world into innocent and culpable parties. If the capacity to gaslight is more widely distributed than its most extreme iterations would lead us to believe, perhaps we've all done more of it than we care to admit. Each of us has been the one making our way back into bed, vulnerable and naked, and each of us has been the one saying, Come back into this bed I made for you. ♦

OUR ENVIRONMENTAL PLEDGE

BY MEGAN AMRAM

It's National Environmental Awareness Month, and all of us at SaaxoAmco Petroleum Corp. are dedicated to using our powerful access and responsibility to insure that the Earth is a healthier and cleaner place for future generations. To demonstrate our dedication, we would like to announce a new array of environmental-progress investment areas.

Carbon offset: For every pipeline that we build, we will plant one tree in a local park. We will then cut down the tree to make paper to send a memo to that town's mayor to announce that we have planted the tree so that the public knows to come and look at the tree. Just in case the public doesn't know exactly where the tree is, we will make hundreds of thousands of paper maps available to show the location of the tree before we cut it down, so that visitors won't need to use their phones (whose batteries are the world's leading cause of pollution, as per a bunch of studies). This will mean that it will soon take only four thousand trees to see a tree that used to be there! And get this. The mayor we told you about? She's a *woman!*

Minimizing operational waste: At all of our offices, digs, and pipeline sites, we have forbidden our employees to drink bottled water. We have also forbidden them to drink any water whatsoever, so that it can be saved for the flowers and the beetles. In the words of our founder, J. M. Milligan, "We need to look out for the beetles, because they are the only things that will protect us from the Irish." That sort of forward-thinking environmentalism has been part of our brief since 1863.

C-suite jet racing: Because we are so dedicated to the future of this planet, our C-suite will no longer use the company's private jets to drag-race in the sky. Sure, it's the most fun thing ever and life is barely worth living without it, but we'll make the sacrifice.

Greenhouse-gas capture: I think we are capturing carbon dioxide. I haven't followed up, but I'm pretty sure I heard a guy say that we were, like, seven years ago in the break room. As our founder, J. M. Milligan, said in 1870, "The Earth is a beautiful place and we should keep it that way. The only real downside is that Jews live here and poison all the bread and candy unless we make them live underground in special sewers." We agree with the first part!

Biodiversity: SaaxoAmco is committed to fostering biodiversity, which is why we take responsibility for the roughly sixteen hundred new species of flora and fauna that were created when we dumped toxic sludge into the oceans. Who cares about old-fashioned animals like the "black bear" and the "bumblebee"? We can give you a snake with a human penis! The eco-possibilities are endless. And I don't know what you're imagining, but the penis is *much* bigger than the rest of the snake. You're welcome, Mother Earth.

Oil on ducks: We pledge to stop putting crude oil on those baby ducks that you see in soap commercials. Those ducks are, as our founder, J. M. Milligan, loved to say, "slipperier than a drunk Italian with a pregnant wife." He said this about oil-slicked ducks as recently as 1951. But we will not do this anymore.

Girlbosses: We pledge that at least fifteen per cent of SaaxoAmco executives will be women. Is that what we're doing here? Is that what people are mad about right now? Feels like it can't hurt, right?

Going green: We are making SaaxoAmco literally go green by dumping all the runoff from our pipelines straight into a shallow lake, where it turns the formerly clean drinking water a neon green. Also—and this is fun—it makes everything it touches form a human penis. There are lily pads with human penises, even some water spiders with human penises. We don't understand it even a little bit, but did van Gogh question what made his masterpieces beautiful or what gave him a human penis?

Oceanic symphonic harmonization: This new SaaxoAmco project harnesses the boundless potential of resonating frequencies, psychedelic sonatas, and rhythmic ripples, in order to foster an otherworldly bond between marine life and the cosmos. Isn't this good gibberish? Thanks to our panel of highly paid eco-experts, this fake process that doesn't exist will save up to zero biospecies and sounds real!

Killing people: We care about saving the human race more than anything, which is why we pledge to kill more people than ever before. Human beings have huge carbon footprints, and by killing about seven thousand people a day (that's about thirty-five hundred human penises) we will do the equivalent of planting a million and a half trees. We'll do this any way we can—not just by polluting the planet but by taking to the streets with knives and bayonets if we have to. By the time SaaxoAmco is done, *no* one will have to live on a polluted planet Earth anymore. No one will have to live *anywhere*. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

DEPT. OF GASTRONOMY

FEAST MODE

The hottest table in France is an all-you-can-eat buffet in a local rec center.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

My friend Guillaume is always telling me interesting things. Like: there's a dance called the Madison that many French people think is a regular feature of parties in the United States. Guillaume recently alerted me that a man who was fired for not being fun enough at work got his job back, winning five hundred thousand euros in a landmark case. Last summer, I went to dinner at Guillaume's, and he mentioned a restaurant, an all-you-can-eat buffet not far from his home town in the South of France. He had just celebrated his birthday there. There was talk of flaming duck and a chocolate fountain. Guillaume showed me a picture of the crystal-curtained lobster tower—seven layers of vermillion crustaceans, topped by an upright specimen thrusting its claws to the sky, as though it had just slayed a halftime show, amid a cloud of mist.

The restaurant is called Les Grands Buffets. A week or so later, I went to its Web site, and entered my e-mail address to receive a secure link to make a reservation online. It was late July. The next available table was for a Wednesday in December, at 8:45 P.M. "We remind you that this reservation is non-modifiable, you cannot change the number of guests, the date of the meal, the hour of the meal, or the name of the beneficiary," the confirmation e-mail read. If I wanted to bring children under ten years of age, I needed to submit their names at least three days in advance. (They eat at discounted rates.) I would be refused entry if I showed up in sweatpants, an undershirt, a bathing suit, a sports jersey, flip-flops, a ball cap, or any of three kinds of shorts. The toughest reservation in France, it turns out, is not at a Michelin-starred destination like Mirazur or Septime. It's at an all-you-can-eat buffet situated in a municipal rec center in the smallish city of Narbonne.

Last year, more than three hundred and eighty thousand people paid fifty-two euros and ninety centimes for the pleasure of visiting Les Grands Buffets. Drinks cost extra, but they are sold at a minimal markup, so a bottle of Mercier champagne costs twenty-five euros, about the same as it does in the supermarket. Everything else is unlimited, from caviar to stewed tripe. There are nine kinds of foie gras on offer, and five pâtés en croûte, including one known as Sleeping Beauty's Pillow, which involves a panoply of meats (chicken, duck, wild boar, hare, quail, sweetbreads, ground pork) and is considered by connoisseurs to be "charcuterie's holy grail." The chef Michel Guérard has called Les Grands Buffets "the greatest culinary theater in the world." Guinness has certified its cheese platter, featuring a hundred and eleven varieties, as the

"More than a gargantuan orgy," one newspaper reported, the restaurant is "a sort of conservatory of the nation's gastronomy."

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER COGGIN

largest known to restaurant-going man. It's more of a cheese room.

All-you-can-eat buffets are usually associated with a catholic array of foods: California rolls and king-crab legs, baby back ribs alongside pasta bakes and hot-fudge sundaes. However, Les Grands Buffets serves only what it considers to be traditional French food. You will find chorizo at the charcuterie station, but there is no pizza, paella, or couscous, no nems or thiéboudiène, even though more than a tenth of people living in France were born elsewhere. Les Grands Buffets takes a panoramic view of the French classics, ranging from the palace-hotel repertoire (lièvre à la royale, peach Melba) to bourgeois cooking (veal blanquette, bœuf bourguignonne), regional specialties (quenelles de brochet, pissaladière), and rustic dishes (snails, frogs' legs). "More than a gargantuan orgy," *Le Journal du Dimanche* reports, the restaurant represents "a sort of conservatory of the nation's gastronomy." The effect is something like a Golden Corral by Auguste Escoffier.

Les Grands Buffets has four dining rooms, sumptuously decorated in different styles. One has an Art Deco theme. Another is a tented room, paying tribute to Louis XIV, complete with an original 1697 map by the King's engraver. Chandeliers made by the craftsmen who light the Château de Chambord cast a lush glow over lemon trees planted in wooden boxes originally designed for the gardens at Versailles. Tables throughout are set in a grand style, down to the fish knives. Waiters clear plates and serve drinks, instead of leaving guests to a soda fountain, squirting cherry Coke into the same paper cup as Tropicana and Sprite.

Louis Privat, the restaurant's proprietor, believes that gastronomy is suffering from globalization: everything is the same everywhere, and even some of the most creative cuisine, he says, "has lost its national identity." In his view, French people, especially the young, need reintroduction to the culture of the table and its associated arts. He sees his restaurant as something like a "Louvre of dishes," with a pedagogic mission as well as an epicurean one. "Why would you put a tarte Tatin in a shot glass?" he said to me recently, a cloud of despair passing over his face. The bistronomy movement, which in the past thirty years has whisked the cloths off French tables and consigned silver to drawers, is, Privat thinks, a cost-cutting crusade masquerading as a trend. "Our golden rule is that, if it's complicated, then that's a good reason to do it," he said.

Pascal Lardellier, an anthropologist at the University of Burgundy, calls Les Grands Buffets "the site of all the superlatives." Last year, it brought in twenty-four million euros in revenue, which reportedly makes it the highest-grossing restaurant in France. The Sybarites of ancient Greece issued invitations to guests up to a year in advance, so that they would have time to prepare their outfits and jewelry. Fans of Les Grands Buffets also book up to a year in advance, and spend the intervening months dreaming of how they'll fill their plates. "My husband and I can't dine out often," one repeat customer wrote on Facebook, "so we prefer to reserve our leisure budget exclusively for Les Grands Buffets."

When December came around, I caught a train from Paris and rode south for five hours before arriving in Narbonne, less than seventy miles north of the border with Spain. The city center, with Roman ruins and a fantastically old-school market hall, was within walking distance, but I took a cab toward the outskirts of town. Bypassing gas stations and a KFC, we circled a roundabout, where an inflatable snowman bobbed in the wind. Finally, we arrived at a massive leisure complex built by the local government in the nineteen-eighties. Inside, gray light streamed through a pyramidal skylight, accentuating turquoise exposed pipes. From the lobby, you could enter a bowling alley, an ice rink, a swimming pool, or Les Grands Buffets. The restaurant's entrance, in cherry wood and gleaming brass, brought to mind the cabin of an ocean liner, plunked down on the set of "Saved by the Bell."

In the vestibule, floor-to-ceiling cabinets displayed a collection of silver serving dishes. Nearby, what was supposedly the world's biggest silver fork was mounted on a wall. While waiting for the maître d', a customer could step on an antique scale the size of a grandfather clock. Lest that put him in an abstemious mood, a golden plaque displayed a quote in Middle French, from Rabelais's "Gargantua": "*Fay ce que vouldras*," it commanded—"Do as you wish."

It was nearly the end of lunchtime. Guests clustered around the dessert bar, where chocolate flowed down the famous fountain in glossy sheets. They ladled chocolate onto strawberries, pineapple chunks, financiers, and canelés from separate vats offering a choice of white, dark, and milk. As Roy Strong writes in "Feast: A History of Grand Eating," fountains have dazzled diners for centuries, disgorging rose water and eau de muscade. One attendee of a banquet in Lille in 1454 recalled a statue of a naked girl, guarded by a real lion, who sprayed mulled wine from her right breast.

An employee led me to the tented room, where Louis Privat was finishing up a meal with a pair of V.I.P.s. Privat is seventy, with cornflower-blue eyes and a meringue of gray hair. He was wearing a black cashmere turtleneck, and bemoaning chefs' attempts to pass off bastardized forms of classic dishes on an unsuspecting public. "It's tomfoolery," he said. Imagine: serving a Mont Blanc without chestnuts, or calling a plate of beans a cassoulet. He continued, "That's the main fight we're leading today, not to let these dishes be corrupted, even if the recipes aren't patented." At another table, a corps of waiters wheeled out a gramophone that played André Claveau crooning "*Bon anniversaire.*" Out the window, one could glimpse a five-story waterslide.

Privat ordered tulip-shaped glasses of raspberry eau de vie—an eight-euro-and-fifty-centime supplement—for his guests. In the restaurant's gilded ice-cream parlor, diners availed themselves of eleven flavors, along with Irish coffee and lemon ice doused in vodka. Also on offer was the trou normand, or Norman hole—a shot of Calvados served over apple sorbet, which is said to counteract the sensation of a full stomach. The restaurant serves about a hundred and fifty trous normands during each service of five hundred diners. Some guests take more than one. They are welcome to. "Our job is to rid people of their inhibitions," Privat said.

Like all buffets, Les Grands Buffets is a volume business. About eighty-five per cent of the restaurant's patrons are French; others come in large numbers from Belgium and Spain, notwithstanding a decision by Les Grands Buffets to prohibit tour buses. Hardly a year passes

"Out of the way—I'm a doctor!"

"Out of the way—he's not in-network."

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without Privat dreaming up a new enticement or entertainment. "We add things all the time, but we hardly ever take things away," he said. (A fancy version of mashed potatoes, he admitted, had not been a success.) Irène Derose, a retired bank employee who lives in a village in the Hérault, has been to Les Grands Buffets eighteen times, most recently for her birthday, which she celebrated by eating both lunch and dinner at the restaurant. "And I still haven't tasted everything," she told me.

Restaurateurs typically adhere to a three-hundred-per-cent markup, so that a hanger steak that costs five euros appears on the menu at fifteen, and a filet that costs ten goes for thirty. Because Privat's costs are relatively flat—he serves the same thing every day to a consistent number of diners and receives bulk discounts—he chooses to earn his margin as a stable rate, rather than as a multiple. "It's the same supplier, the same refrigerator, the same cook," he said. "What justifies taking ten euros on one dish and twenty on the other? Here, if you want to eat something better, I take the same amount."

Some buffets jack up their prices on weekends or charge customers for uneaten food. At Shady Maple Smorgasbord, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which bills itself as America's largest all-you-can-eat buffet, the vibe is almost prosecutorial. "Don't Risk It for a Biscuit," the restaurant admonishes diners, warning that anybody who pockets a roll will be treated as a shoplifter. (I couldn't help but think of the "Simpsons" episode in which Homer is dragged out of the Frying Dutchman by the armpits after helping himself to a whole steam tray of shrimp.)

By contrast, Privat practices a sort of gastronomic prosperity gospel. He believes that the client who feels that he is not being taken advantage of will relax; the client who is relaxed will have another glass of wine; the client who enjoys his wine will go home with a case (rendering the bottle drunk at the table gratis); the client who savors his case at home will come back. "I prefer to get away from this logic of rationing," Privat said. "If you give, you will receive."

He suggested that we sample the restaurant's russe: a striated dessert of sponge cake and praline cream. It was concocted by a French baker in the nineteen-twenties, but was named either for its main ingredient, almonds sourced from Crimea, or for the sprinkling of powdered sugar on top that recalls the snowy Siberian steppes. The russe was a touch sweet for my liking, so I went back to the dessert station, trying to think of a French delicacy that wasn't represented. But they were all there, from technical feats like île flottante to spoonable goops like chocolate mousse. In a nook, an employee was flambéing crêpes on a silver chariot that originally belonged to Le Negresco hotel, in Nice. Despite the foreign-food ban, a brownie had sneaked into the offering. (The French pronounce it "broonie," by the way.) I took a slice of opéra cake—almond sponge, buttercream, coffee syrup, chocolate ganache—and thought of *le droit à l'erreur*. The principle, enshrined in a 2018 French law, minimizes punishment for people who screw up their taxes in good faith. I added a dollop of prunes stewed in red wine to my plate. Like few things in life, the all-you-can-eat buffet guarantees the right to make mistakes.

The writer André Borel d'Hauterive once attempted a taxonomy of eaters: the *gastronome* (appreciates good food and wine and partakes reasonably), the *gourmand* (prefers quantity to quality), the *friand* (has a sweet tooth), the *goinfre* (eats enthusiastically to excess), the *ventru* ("makes a God of his stomach"), the *glouton* (dessert comes and he has no idea what he's eaten), the *goulu* (dessert comes and he has no idea how much he's eaten).

Buffet-goers might fall into any of these categories, but their chosen pursuit requires a logistical edge. There are competitors to be assessed, maneuvers to be considered, routes to be mapped. I was reminded of a football playbook as I studied a brochure that featured a bird's-eye view of Les Grands Buffets, with arrows indicating various counters ("Ice Cream Shop," "9 Kinds of Ham"). If a day at Disneyland is all about beating the lines, a meal at Les Grands Buffets is an exercise in optimizing calories. Some expert buffet-goers swear by starting with the most expensive stuff, or by assembling an "introductory taster plate." Others warn against maxing out on carbs. One Reddit tactician writes, "*NEVER* take a *single* piece of food until you do a preliminary reconnaissance sweep of the *entire* buffet. No use filling up on fried chicken breasts when there's a prime rib carvery station at the end."

Les Grands Buffets prides itself on never running out of anything. At the same time, the restaurant claims to pro-

duce little waste. "We know down to the gram how much to allot for each client," Pierre Cavalier, the general manager, told me. "The foie gras, for example—it's not fifty or fifty-one, it's precisely forty-eight grams!" The average customer, he continued, goes through 1.3 oysters and 7.4 plates. (He added that leftovers go toward staff meals for the restaurant's two hundred employees.) Once, as the stock of shrimp dipped perilously low, Cavalier jumped into his car and sped to the local fishmonger to get more. "Without looking at the price, I bought everything they had," he recalled. "The diners were lucky that day."

The atmosphere at Les Grands Buffets is calm and even reverent. Still, stratagems abound. I saw one multigenerational family gathered around a table loaded with plates, each containing a single foodstuff: rillettes, saucisson, pâté en croûte, œufs mimosa, organic crudités. Their postures were relaxed and the conversation was flowing, as was the twenty-five-euro champagne. I realized that they had decided to set up an *apéro*—the French equivalent of cocktail hour, except that it often lasts much longer—just as they would have at home. Every so often, someone would pop a cherry tomato into his mouth.

Cavalier showed me around the main floor. That morning, staff members had prepared each station according to specifications laid out on laminated pages in a binder. "Obviously, the notion is subjective, but everything needs to look appetizing," Cavalier said. He adjusted the claw of a crab: "They're all supposed to point in the same direction." The cheese room emitted a farmyard odor, but he was unbothered. "Some clients who don't like cheese complain that it stinks, but we own it," he said. (A new ventilation system has apparently helped.)

Cavalier noted with satisfaction that many patrons were following the classic sequence of hors d'œuvre, fish, meat, salad, cheese, and dessert. Some people think that there is a correlation between price and abandon: the cheaper the buffet, the higher the customers stack their plates. If Shoney's inspires teetering skyscrapers of meat loaf and onion rings, Les Grands Buffets encourages horizontality, with stuffed quails and leeks vinaigrette and babas au rhum stretching neatly into the distance, an endless suburb of plates.

There is just one rule at Les Grands Buffets: at the stations where diners place orders instead of helping themselves, they can take only one dish at a time. This creates a minor barrier to marquee food while insuring that customers can get it hot. At the rotisserie, a short line had formed in front of a stylish open kitchen, where cooks in toques bustled around, wielding copper pots. Privat sees the restaurant as a preserve not only of hard-to-find dishes but also of disappearing métiers: *rôtisseur*, *écailler*, *saucier*. A sign bore a list of twenty-six specialties that customers could have prepared in front of them. A man stepped up to the counter and ordered an omelette with cèpes.

The orders went out over a microphone. "*Oui, chef!*" the underlings called. (Privat had warned them in a staff meeting that morning that just "*oui*" or "*ouais*" would not suffice.) The customer waited with a ticket, which he exchanged for the dish once it appeared. The plates kept coming: marrowbones, tournedos Rossini, andouillette with mustard sauce, a whole roasted turbot. At the back of the kitchen, a cook stood on a raised platform, basting a suckling pig.

Food historians trace the origins of the modern buffet to the seventeenth century, when Louis XIV entertained at *impromptus* and *soirées d'appartement*, his servants quickly dressing tables with silver torches, pyramids of flowers, and filigreed baskets heaving with oranges, lemons, and candied fruits. This aristocratic

habit was eventually codified as *service à la française*, distinguished by the practice of putting multiple dishes on the table at once. "The buffet, historically, *c'est chic*," *Madame Figaro* recently declared, in an article about the resurgence of all-you-can-eat restaurants.

The first commercial buffets likely originated in gaming houses and at ticketed balls. In the nineteenth century, Parisians frequented buffets such as one that stood at 10 Boulevard Montmartre, offering a choice of dishes at sixty centimes, seventy-five centimes, and one franc. "No table, no utensils, no *garçon*," one journalist noted. "Some people talk about these places as the first fast food in France," Loïc Bienassis, of the European Institute for the History of Culture and Food, said. "That's debatable, but it's certain that they were intended for eaters in a hurry."

With the advent of railroads, buffets gained widespread popularity in France. They were a particularly convenient format for train stations, where hungry passengers came and went throughout the day. As the pace of travel accelerated, these "station buffets" suffered. *Le Monde* reported in 1955 that only about four hundred were left. At the same time, though, buffets were enjoying success at all-inclusive holiday destinations such as Club Med. The generation that had survived the Second World War "knew what it was to lack," Kilien Stengel, of the University of Tours, told *Madame Figaro*. Bienassis sees buffets as the gastronomic manifestation of postwar economic prosperity, reflecting "a society that no longer measured, that had stopped counting, that believed in infinite growth."

Swedes popularized the buffet in America with a revolving smorgasbord at the 1939 World's Fair. In the mid-forties, the El Rancho Hotel opened Las Vegas's first all-you-can-eat buffet, luring deal-seeking gamblers to the Buckaroo Buffet "chuck wagon." The concept caught on, with Sin City becoming the historic home of an exuberant strain of gluttony. "The South has fried chicken, Texas has barbecue, Chicago has hot dogs, New York has pizza and Las Vegas has them all," C. Moon Reed, of Las Vegas *Weekly*, writes. "That is to say, our regional cuisine is the buffet."

I have loved buffets since childhood—if my dad was working late, my mom sometimes took us to a "steak house" chain called Quincy's. It may have served sirloins and filets, but I never saw them, loading up instead on yeast rolls and ice cream from a soft-serve machine. Call them tacky, or repulsive, but buffets elicit a hopeful, almost juvenile feeling of possibility. As with a scavenger hunt, there is a satisfaction in checking things off your list. As with a yard sale, you never

know what kinds of treasure you'll find, nestled amid the junk.

One person's plenty, however, is another's overkill. Even in the first century, Petronius was satirizing the culinary excesses of wealthy Romans, envisioning a banquet at which slaves trimmed guests' toenails and the belly of a gutted pig disgorged sausages and puddings. In the 1973 film "La Grande Bouffe," a group of friends retreat to a villa and stuff themselves to death on meats, sweets, and the decadence of a consumerist society in which everyone has to have everything all at once.

COVID was supposed to kill buffets, which have long been associated in the public imagination with dubious hygiene. The fear is sometimes warranted: a 1987 study of customers in self-service restaurants observed nearly a dozen "problem behaviors" in salad bars alone, reporting that "licking fingers was noted 45 times and most frequently associated with salad dressings." At Les Grands Buffets, most of the cold offerings are presented on specially designed refrigerated slabs, and Cavalier told me that the restaurant works with an independent lab to develop its hygiene protocols. "If they tell us that something lasts five days, then we give it two," he said. "The idea, as I'm sure you can understand, is never to take a risk."

According to IBISWorld, a market-research company, several mid-range chains folded in 2020 and 2021. But both budget-conscious and high-end buffets have partially recovered since the pandemic, aided by inflation, social media, and the pent-up desire for communal fun. "We're the comeback kids," the C.E.O. of Golden Corral told the *Times*. The Bacchanal Buffet at Caesars Palace charges up to $84.99 a head for a mind-boggling spread (Filipino congee, red-velvet waffles, an omelette bar, birria tacos). In College Point, New York, the Buffet recently augmented its pan-Asian offerings (sushi, hibachi, dim sum, teppanyaki) with a Brazilian Churrasco Experience.

In France, elaborate buffets featuring attractions such as koi ponds and karaoke have lately become popular. According to *Le Monde*, around seventy per cent are run by people of Chinese descent, many with roots in Wenzhou. "An essential element of peri-urban civilization, with its housing estates and warehouses, maxibuffets, most of which are halal, attract a middle class who want to taste chic without emptying their wallets," the article notes. Les Grands Buffets strives to set itself apart from its anything-goes peers, calling itself, for example, an "eat-what-you-wish" rather than an "all-you-can-eat" buffet.

At one point, Privat griped that a certain Hong Kong restaurant had plagiarized his concept. I went to its Web site and wasn't too convinced. For one thing, the place serves abalone and curries. Yet the success of Les Grands Buffets has led to imitators elsewhere in France. Customers at one restaurant in the southwest, for instance, can visit a familiar-looking array of stations, right down to a rotisserie with a raised platform for basting meats.

"I have a theory that too much sunlight isn't good for you."

In the evening, I dined with Privat in the newly constructed Salon Doré Jean de la Fontaine. It is decorated in a neoclassical style and pays tribute to the seventeenth-century fabulist, immortalized in a series of murals featuring his crafty foxes and unsuspecting crows. "I wanted to reopen in a flamboyant fashion after the pandemic," Privat explained. He looked around the dining room. To his satisfaction, many people were dressed for the occasion. There were several women wearing sequins. A toddler sucked on a pacifier clipped to his shirt with a spiffy gold chain.

Privat was born in Narbonne. His father was a doctor, with a thriving clinic, which his mother helped run. They hoped that Privat would work at the clinic one day. He pursued acting instead, joining a theatre troupe in Toulouse. Later, he studied international commerce and became a certified accountant. In his thirties, Privat and his soon-to-be wife, Jane, took over a dusty restaurant at the seaside near Narbonne. (Jane is now the purchasing manager at Les Grands Buffets.) They renovated everything in a blue-and-white scheme and replaced the frozen food and canned sauces with fresh local fish. The restaurant was a success, but by then the Privats had two children, and its seasonal rhythms clashed with their desire for a peaceful family life.

In 1989, Narbonne was looking for someone to handle catering in the new rec center. The Privats decided to put in a bid. "At the time, especially in the provinces, going to a restaurant was hardly the habit that it is today," Louis Privat once recalled. He knew that in order to flourish they would have to draw people from far beyond the city. So he decided to offer something novel: an all-you-can-eat cafeteria. Little by little, he upgraded the menu and tricked out the décor. The hyper-French concept emerged only gradually—a brand identity as much as a patriotic conviction. "We had sushi," Cavalier confessed, of the early days, during our tour.

Privat can come off as something of

a reactionary, valorizing a national culture that has probably never been as homogeneous as he would like to think. But his politics are less predictable than his tarte-Tatin fetish and his lectures about manners might lead one to believe. Les Grands Buffets offers interest-free loans to help employees pay off debt, and workers participate in a profit-sharing agreement. In 2022, Privat made headlines around the country for raising buffet prices in order to bring up employee income by an average of about thirty per cent. And, for all their talk about French tradition, Privat abstains from alcohol, and Cavalier eats meat at work but "not in my private life," because of ethical concerns. Over the years, scores of investors have tried to persuade Privat to expand Les Grands Buffets to other locations. He has refused, because he considers the bald pursuit of profit pointless, and the idea of churning out imitations bores him. "Using Les Grands Buffets as an A.T.M. doesn't interest me at all," he said, picking at some smoked salmon.

For several years, Privat has threatened to decamp from Narbonne, saying that his public landlords don't maintain the facilities properly. In 2023, he accelerated this campaign, conducting public auditions for a new site. *Le Parisien* reported, "The juicy saga of the move of this culinary institution has a million French cuisine enthusiasts in suspense on social networks on both sides of the Pyrenees." As Privat delivered theatrical ultimatums, local officials sprang into seduction mode. One parliamentary candidate even made retaining Les Grands Buffets part of his platform.

"I completely share Mr. Privat's vision of being able to continue to develop and innovate," Bertrand Malquier, the city's mayor, told me. "We are fighting so that, when he makes his choice, it will be exclusively Narbonne." Last week, Narbonne and Privat were set to announce that they had come to an agreement: Narbonne would pledge fifteen million euros to renovating the rec center, carving out a separate entrance for Les Grands Buffets, while Privat would commit nearly five million to the creation of new attractions, including a separate tea salon and a shop selling regional products, with a shared goal of increasing the annual number of visitors to eight hundred thousand. Every Narbonnais, Malquier told me fondly, has been to Les Grands Buffets at least once. In fact, his family had just celebrated his son's eleventh birthday there. Malquier had discovered a delicious new cheese. It was actually from England—Stilton, he thought it was called?

Recently, I was listening to "On Va Déguster," a popular French radio show, when the host mentioned BOULOM, an all-you-can-eat buffet in the Eighteenth Arrondissement of Paris that was, according to the show, "turning away hundreds of people a weekend." BOULOM is the venture of Julien Duboué, a classically trained chef (he's worked at George V and with Daniel Boulud), and it has garnered fantastic reviews in publications such as *Le Figaro*, which congratulated Duboué for his decision "to lend his nobility to the all-you-can-eat buffet, an exercise in style regularly massacred in the establishments that practice it."

A friend and I visited the restaurant for lunch the following Tuesday. We entered through a picture-perfect bakery, squeezing past racks loaded with cooling loaves and pastries, and emerged into a back room packed with customers, as though we'd stepped through a magical wardrobe. BOULOM charges between thirty-two and fifty-eight euros per person, depending on the meal and the day of the week. A sign warns that two euros will be added to the bill for every hundred grams of waste, but an employee I spoke to said that she'd never seen it enforced. The idea is more to create a chilling effect, bringing overzealous plate loaders back to reason.

The place is supposed to feel like a village inn of yesteryear, where simple, lovingly made dishes are left to simmer on the stove throughout the day, offering nourishment to all comers. The weekday spread includes roast meats, a dozen desserts, and name-brand ingredients like Joël Dupuch oysters and Eric Ospital charcuterie. I loved the grilled mackerel, and my friend made what amounted to a personal pan pizza of the crème brûlée, nearly emptying the dish in three rounds. Still, it felt like a regular meal. Seafood occupied a few metal bowls, not a tower. I ate no more and no less than usual, took no chances, enrobed no strawberries, commissioned no omelettes, made no mistakes. I missed Les Grands Buffets. The point of all its over-the-top excess might actually be a kind of scarcity: an experience so bonkers that it's exceedingly rare.

Before I left Narbonne, I returned for a final meal at Les Grands Buffets. Precisely at noon, I dropped my stuff at a table for one in the tent room and went off to fill my first plate. I started with the caviar (technically, it's just "fish eggs"), simply being greedy. Then I added some stuffed mussels, because someone had recommended them; some leeks mimosa, for health; some Serrano ham, because Les Grands Buffets lets you put on a metal glove and shave your morsel off the leg yourself. In the cheese room, I pushed a button and an automated slicer produced a frilly mop of Tête de Moine. Now I was having fun. Buffets are the culinary version of your wedding day or a big birthday—a bunch of foods that don't belong together all in the same space, somehow getting along.

I was standing near the rotisserie when, suddenly, a "Welcome, shoppers"-style intercom activated. "Ladies and gentlemen, behold the pressed-duck ritual, just as it was conceived in the nineteenth century," a suave male voice intoned. "The duck has been roasted on a spit. It is now placed on the table of the master *canardier*. With the silver duck press, he will crush the carcass to extract the blood and juices, which give the sauce its unique flavor."

I turned to see a black-aproned employee emerging from backstage, carrying an impaled bird as though it were the Olympic torch. Flames leaped from a cup at the bottom of the spit. She proceeded to the table, where she was joined by the *canardier*. "Discover le canard au sang, the emblematic dish of French gastronomy," the voice continued. "Les Grands Buffets is the only restaurant in France to offer this historic recipe every day." The triumphant chords of "Ride of the Valkyries" filled the room as the *canardier* lifted the duck off the spit with two forks, raising the carcass up to the gods. ♦

In a clearing in the Brazilian Amazon, I stood with a group of armed men, discussing a viral TikTok video. The video, shot from a helicopter full of illegal miners, showed a vast stretch of rain forest, with dense foliage extending in all directions. The only sign of human habitation was below: a dirt circle surrounded by fanlike lean-tos made of wooden poles and palm fronds. It was a *maloca*, a traditional compound of the Yanomami, an Indigenous group that inhabits a remote territory in the rain forest of northern Brazil.

As the helicopter hovered, five Yanomami ran into the clearing, gazing up at the intruders. Several lifted bows and shot arrows. The miners whooped with derisive laughter. "Look at the cannibals," one of them cried. Another said, "Go on, throw the arrow," before telling his friends, "Let's get out of here." They flew away, yelling, "Bunch of faggots!"

For many viewers, the video was a rare document of an encounter with *isolados*—members of a Yanomami community living with no links to the outside world. For the armed men I was with, it was evidence: a potential lead in a high-profile initiative, sponsored by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to dislodge thousands of illicit miners from Yanomami territory.

The men—fighters with combat gear and assault rifles—belonged to a tiny special-forces unit known as the Specialized Inspection Group, or G.E.F. Most of them wore face coverings; mining in the rain forest is increasingly infiltrated by violent criminals, making it dangerous for them to reveal their identity. The G.E.F.'s leader and cofounder was Felipe Finger, a wiry man in his forties with a salt-and-pepper beard. Finger trained in forestry engineering, and his unit works under the Brazilian ministry for the environment. But he has spent much of his adult life in armed operations to protect the wilderness, and he talks like a soldier, with frequent references to operations and objectives and neutralizing threats. The current mission was known to national authorities as Operation Freedom. Finger and his men called it Operation Xapirí, from a Yanomami word for nature spirits.

The group formed a circle as Finger laid out the day's targets. On a

The G.E.F. burns mining camps as part of a long-running counteroffensive against

LETTER FROM RORAIMA

THE AMAZON PATROL

As mining devastates the rain forest, an armed environmental unit fights back.

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

environmental depredation. "Wherever they go, the miners destroy everything," Felipe Finger, the unit's leader, says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOMMASO PROTTI

G.P.S., he pointed to a yellow circle showing where the *isolados* had been harassed in the TikTok video, and then red dots, representing the miners, in an irregular cluster around them. Miners had been detected roughly eight miles from the *isolados*—meaning that they had penetrated dangerously far into a protected ecosystem. "Wherever they go, the miners destroy everything, entire river systems," Finger said indignantly. "And they do it at the expense of these highly vulnerable people."

The Amazon faces many threats. The constant proliferation of road networks—both legal and illegal—brings new settlements, and growing human populations burn forests to clear land for cattle and crops. The rain forest is enduring an unprecedented drought, and in Roraima, the state where the Yanomami territory is situated, wildfires set off by such slash-and-burn efforts have spread out of control; more than four thousand square miles burned there this year, releasing vast amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. But mining for gold and cassiterite, a mineral used in electronics, exacerbates the environmental problems with singular ferocity. Wildcat miners, using giant excavators, dredgers, and mercury, can devastate miles of river and forest in a matter of days. With the price of gold now above two thousand dollars an ounce on the global market, a rush is under way in the Amazon, and illegal prospecting accounts for more than half of Brazil's supply.

The G.E.F. team was travelling to its targets in two helicopters. Finger took the lead, along with another founder of the unit—Roberto Cabral, a boyish-looking man of fifty-five. When a mine site was found, their chopper would go in first, in case there was gunfire.

As the helicopters picked their way through the forest, Finger radioed to say that he had "a situation." We followed G.P.S. coördinates to a river bend, where his chopper had landed on a sandbank. Just upriver was a boat, loaded with equipment and fuel cannisters—a miner's supply launch. Finger and several of his men waded toward it, their weapons drawn, but its occupants had fled. While we looked on, the G.E.F. men torched the boat, a plume of fire rising from the water.

A few miles downriver, the helicopters paused over a scarred patch of jungle and a carved-out stretch of riverbank: a mine that the team had destroyed in a previous operation. There was no evidence that digging had resumed, but not far off were signs of another miners' camp: a huddle of plastic tents barely visible beneath the tree canopy. In a clearing at the edge of the river, the miners had driven rows of cut saplings into the dirt—a low-tech defense against landing helicopters. Eventually, Finger found a way to set down, and his men yanked the poles from the sand and threw them aside.

The team fanned out and searched for miners, but there was no one in sight. When the G.E.F. can't catch *garimpeiros*, as the illegal miners are called, the goal is to destroy their camps and their equipment: excavators, planes, house-size dredging rafts used to dig up the river bottom. The team quickly found the mine pit, an ugly gouge of muddy water with a pump, a giant hose, and a sluice, along with a truck engine that served as a generator. Using cans of fuel left by the miners, they doused the machinery and lit it on fire. For good measure, one of them peppered the generator with bullets.

While a few men stood guard, scanning the forest edges, others moved through the tents and a cookhouse area, searching for anything that might provide a clue to who controls the mines. (Some were makeshift local operations; others were run by crime syndicates or shadow investors in major cities.) Then they piled up flammable materials and set the rest of the camp ablaze.

As we watched the fire spread, a small plane buzzed away over the trees. It belonged to the miners, Cabral said; they must have been warned that the G.E.F. was coming. He pointed to a white rectangular antenna on a tall pole in the center of the camp and said, "Starlink"—Elon Musk's portable satellite-communications system. One of the men hacked at the pole with a machete until it toppled, and Finger broke the antenna and took the modem. The G.E.F. fighters are well trained, and equipped with satellite imaging, combat gear, assault rifles, and night-vision goggles provided by the U.S. State Department. Increasingly, though, their opponents have similar resources. The day's raid had destroyed a facility that might have employed a dozen miners. The number of people involved in illegal mining in the Brazilian Amazon is believed to be as many as half a million.

For four years, Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, insisted that the crisis in the rain forest was an elaborate hoax. A far-right former military officer who embraced Donald Trump as an ally and a role model, Bolsonaro maintained that advocates for the environment and for Indigenous rights were part of a communist-globalist conspiracy. He ran for the Presidency promising to dismantle environmental safeguards, and his supporters took him at his word. He assumed office in January, 2019, and within months an estimated twenty thousand *garimpeiros* were at work in Yanomami land. Despite Yanomami leaders' pleas for help and a Supreme Court judge's order for the miners to be forced out, Bolsonaro did nothing.

Lula, a veteran left-wing politician who served as Brazil's President from 2003 to 2010, took office again last year, after a perilously close election. By then, the Yanomami were enduring a crisis, with malaria, hunger, and infant malnutrition spreading widely; hundreds of children had died. Outsiders committed growing numbers of rapes and murders, including incidents in which miners on motorboats shot and tear-gassed Yanomami as they sped past a riverside community.

The crisis gave Lula an opportunity to present himself as a savior, and in one of his first acts as President he flew to Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima. He toured a clinic that treated Indigenous patients, and in emotional remarks afterward he blamed Bolsonaro for "the neglect and abandonment of the Yanomami." It was "more than a humanitarian crisis," he added. "What I saw was a genocide." He vowed to end illegal mining on Indigenous land, just as he had vowed, during the campaign, to achieve "zero deforestation"

in the rain forest by 2030. "The planet needs the Amazon alive," he said.

Lula declared a public-health emergency and ordered an ambitious series of raids to eject the miners. After operations began, in February, 2023, dramatic footage emerged of security forces surging in and destroying equipment, and of miners fleeing the forest. By June, Lula declared the Yanomami land "free of illegal mining." Soon afterward, his government promoted new statistics showing that illegal deforestation in the Amazon had fallen thirty-four per cent in six months.

Last August, in the city of Belém, Lula presided over a meeting of regional heads of state, and called on them to join him in realizing "a new Amazonian dream"—a grand plan for conservation linked to sustainable development. A few months later, in Dubai for the annual climate-change conference, Lula hailed Brazil's progress in preserving the rain forest, and celebrated its selection as the site of the 2025 summit.

But, for all Lula's talk about a green future, the large-scale operations in Roraima lasted only a few months. The armed forces, which had joined last year's initiative only reluctantly, ceased coöperating. It wasn't even clear how much loyalty the new President could expect from the military, a largely conservative body that ran the country as a dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. After the inauguration, Bolsonaro partisans had launched a chaotic assault on the Presidential palace, Congress, and the Supreme Court, and some police and members of the military had assisted the mob. Lula subsequently pushed out the commanders of the Army and of the police force that guards the capital. But the military is still regarded as hostile to Lula—not to mention to the idea of Indigenous rights.

When I visited Roraima, authorities there said that *garimpeiros* had been returning to Yanomami territory. Some politicians were not only tacitly accommodating the miners but in some cases coöperating with them. For many people in Brazil, the lure of easy money far outweighed environmental concerns. Even the judge who had tried to force Bolsonaro to intervene in the Amazon, Luís Roberto Barroso, acknowledged the persistence of the problem. "There is an inescapable reality," he told me, "which is that you have people living in poverty sitting on top of vast wealth."

Boa Vista is a low-slung city of half a million people, spread along the banks of the Rio Branco. Although Brazil has a complex web of laws to protect the wilderness, settler communities inevitably find ways to profit from the minerals and the timber found in the rain forest, and Boa Vista is booming. Newly built avenues are lined with ostentatious villas, restaurants, and boutiques. Downtown, a children's water park has been constructed next to an artificial beach, decorated with huge, colorfully painted statues of anacondas, jaguars, anteaters, and crocodiles. Near the government offices, a modernist stone sculpture depicts a prospector panning for gold.

Local officials leave little doubt about their support for mining. In 2022, the Roraima state legislature enacted a law that prohibited destroying equipment confiscated from illegal miners within its jurisdiction. Outside the office of the governor, a Bolsonaro ally named Antonio Denarium, miners and ranchers gathered to celebrate with a barbecue and concert, under a banner that read "Garimpo Is Legal." (Last year, after Lula took office, Brazil's Supreme Court threw out the law.)

Cognizant of the local attitudes, the G.E.F. keeps its presence in Boa Vista quiet. When I'd arrived, I was told to check into a hotel and wait. Nearly a week later, I got a call telling me that an unmarked car would take me to meet the team at one of the helicopter launchpads that it uses in town: a walled-in grassy patch at the regional headquarters of the federal police. Around the wall were rusting carcasses of helicopters and airplanes confiscated from miners on previous raids. A couple of years before, an angry group had protested

"By the power vested in me, from this day forth you may text each other as many times in a row as you want without worrying that you're coming across as desperate."

the seizures by attempting to set a government helicopter on fire.

The G.E.F. helicopters took us past the edge of Boa Vista, where vast, treeless cattle ranches and soy farms stretch into the distance. In thirty minutes of flying at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, we could see the open plains start to give way to forest, until my chopper landed at a site where the paved road turns to red-dirt track. It was the team's refuelling point before seeking out mines in Yanomami territory. Near a farmhouse, a shiny steel tanker was parked by a mango tree. The truck drove several hours from Boa Vista each morning with an armed escort.

During the raids last spring, the G.E.F. had been able to refuel in a Yanomami community where the military maintained an outpost. But, a few weeks before my visit, the Air Force had suddenly removed the fuel tank, offering no explanation. The arrangement at the farm was provisional and seemed unlikely to last. One of the agents providing security told me that men in a pickup truck had pulled up early that morning, taken pictures of the tanker and its guards, and then driven away.

Within a few minutes of taking off again, we had entered Yanomami territory: a rolling green blanket, punctuated only occasionally by the bright-yellow flowers of an ipê tree. Deep in the forest, we set down at a gouged mining area. In a camp under the trees, we found a cook fire still burning. The miners clearly weren't far away.

The G.E.F. members started to burn the camp, monitoring the flames to make sure that they didn't spread. While the men worked, Finger quietly headed into the forest, like a hunting dog that had picked up a scent. Fifteen minutes later, he reappeared with a woman in tow. He explained that he'd found underwear drying on a clothesline and a stack of warm pancakes in the mess, and he figured the camp's cook must be nearby. He'd found her hiding in some bushes. She was in her fifties, wearing a pink dress and carrying a bag stuffed with belongings. She looked frightened.

Speaking in breathy bursts, she told Cabral and Finger that her name was Margarida. She was a widow, and after her husband's death she had struggled to pay rent and buy food. She had arrived at the mine two days before, after a long river journey, she said, and she didn't know anything about its operation—not even what the miners' names were. Cabral, looking skeptical, asked what her salary was. She gave a figure that amounted to about four hundred dollars a month. It was a suspiciously small amount, but the cooks, invariably women, were the worst-paid employees of the mines; younger cooks earned extra money as sex workers or were coerced into prostitution.

No one could say precisely how many miners had made their way back into the territory after last year's raids, or had never left, but one government ministry recently estimated the number at about seven thousand. Many of the people who worked the mines were impoverished locals looking for any job they could find; others made a career of it. At one camp, we'd come across the résumé of a thirty-seven-year-old named José, who had been a sales assistant at an auto-parts shop in Boa Vista, then moved to the city of Manaus to work in a shoe store. His legal employment history ended in 2016, which presumably was when he had turned to illegal mining. Finger drew a distinction between people like Margarida and those like José. "These simpler people, a hundred per cent are there for financial gains," he said. "But many of the miners are in this for a better life style. If he can make five thousand reais per week mining, why would he stay in the city earning a thousand or less?"

Indigenous people who got involved in mining had more complex incentives. Many were motivated by fear, some by necessity, others by the lure of consumer goods that miners offered, including liquor, shotguns, and new iPhones. "If an Indigenous person was co-opted by a criminal, either simply to turn a blind eye or to directly participate, it's a sign that the state failed," Finger argued. "The state is not present, and the criminals managed to occupy this gap. And some Indigenous people, without another way to carry on their lives there, end up getting involved."

The G.E.F. team sometimes showed concern for the miners; when they found prescription medicine during a raid, they threw it clear of the burn zone so that its owner could retrieve it. But, when I asked Cabral if we were going to fly the cook out with us, he shook his head. "She got herself here," he said. "She can get herself out." He reassured me that most of the miners attached to the camp were hiding in the forest and would surely emerge as soon as we left. With their food stores destroyed, they would have to evacuate the jungle, and would make the journey together.

Heading back to the choppers, Finger was frustrated. This mine had been destroyed not long before. "They were quiet for a couple of months," he said. "But when they saw that the operations had decreased they came back, and they've learned how to adapt to our tactics." He pointed to a wide trail leading from the mine into the forest. It was a track for A.T.V.s, built under tree cover to thwart detection from the sky. On his G.P.S., Finger measured our distance from the *isolados*. "Less than thirty miles," he said. "It's very close, considering the range some Yanomami need for hunting."

For four decades, the Amazon has existed in a state of persistent conflict—protected by federal law but threatened by the people who live there. On the way to Boa Vista, I'd had lunch in Brasília with Sydney Possuelo, who had seen much of this history at first hand. Possuelo is a legendary *sertanista*—one of the jungle scouts who made the first contacts with isolated people. He started travelling into the Amazon six decades ago. Since then, he has hiked thousands of miles through unexplored jungle, been shot by arrows, and made first contact with seven Indigenous groups. Now eighty-three, he occupies a position in the Brazilian consciousness somewhere between Buffalo Bill and John Muir.

We met at an open-air restaurant and sat outside, at his request, until a tropical downpour forced us indoors. We were joined by Rubens Valente, the author of "The Rifles and the Arrows," an author-

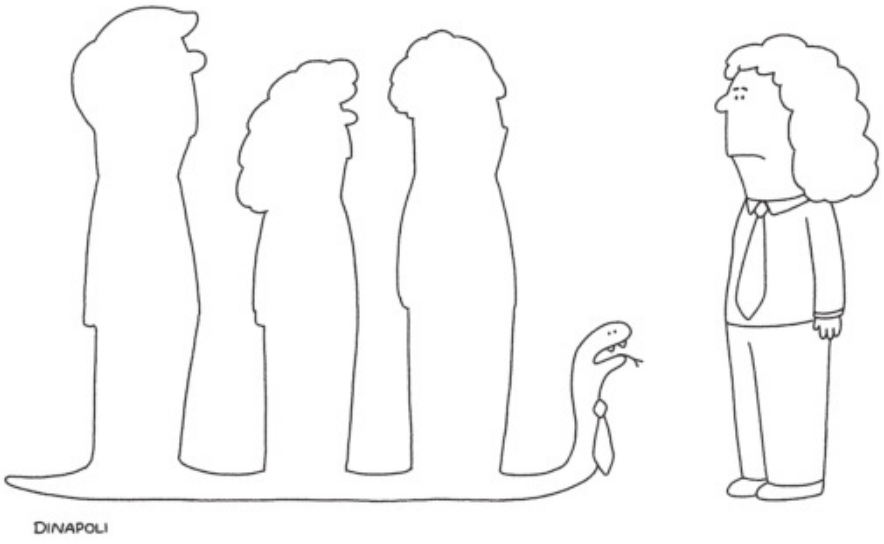
itative book on Indigenous resistance movements. A soft-spoken man of fifty-four, Valente is one of a very few Brazilian journalists who have made a career of reporting on the Amazon and its Indigenous inhabitants. This media inattention is symptomatic of a larger national neglect, which is partly a result of geography. The rain forest makes up seventy-eight per cent of Brazil's landmass but contains less than fifteen per cent of its population. For Brazilians who live outside the Amazon, it can seem as remote and exotic as it does to Americans.

As a young man, Possuelo worked for FUNAI, Brazil's agency for Indigenous affairs. In those days, the Indigenous were thought of as "wild Indians," and Possuelo's job was to initiate contact in order to "tame" them; the military government planned to open the "green hell" of the Amazon to development by building a highway through it.

By the early nineteen-eighties, Possuelo had begun to understand that exposure to the outside world was largely disastrous for Indigenous groups. Many succumbed to disease; others suffered from alcoholism and sexual exploitation, their forests targeted by unscrupulous loggers and miners. Some chiefs sold access to their lands and began to make profits of their own.

In 1987, after the fall of Brazil's dictatorship, Possuelo created a department at FUNAI that organized expeditions to confirm the presence of *isolados*, to legally protect their territories—but he insisted they be left alone unless they initiated contact. "The true importance of the *isolados* isn't in their numbers," Possuelo told me. "It's in their languages and cultures and societies, about which we know little, and that has to be respected." A new constitution, instituted the following year, contained provisions to protect Indigenous lands. Soon afterward, Possuelo led the demarcation of the vast Yanomami territory, a chunk of jungle that spans almost twenty-four million acres—an area larger than Portugal—along the border with Venezuela.

In those days, the Yanomami were one of Brazil's most secluded Indigenous groups; regular contact with the outside world had begun barely two decades before. Today, about thirty thousand Yanomami live in the Brazilian Amazon. Spread out in some three hundred communities, they live much as they always have, in *malocas* that house communal groups of several dozen families. They hunt, fish, and gather fruit in the forest, and also grow a few crops—plantains, cassava, maize—for their sustenance.



"I'm not great at this whole networking thing."

• •

The gold in Yanomami rivers has been a problem for as long as outsiders have made their way into the jungle. Possuelo said that, in the early nineties, there were perhaps forty thousand miners operating there, but that he and his allies had forced most of them out. It was harder now, though. The Indigenous were more involved in the trade, and the miners were better equipped and more organized. Perhaps most important, he said, the military wasn't helping to protect the Yanomami. The armed forces maintained three bases in the territory, but, he said, it had not deployed soldiers to stop river traffic, or consistently used aerial surveillance to prevent the miners from coming in. The military had opposed the creation of the Yanomami territory from the beginning, Possuelo explained; when he was marking its borders, the commander of the Army accused him of advancing an independent "Yanomami empire," stretching across the border with Venezuela. Possuelo laughed as he recalled news stories that the military had orchestrated to spread the conspiracy theory.

Valente said that the armed forces' view of the Amazon hadn't changed: "The military fundamentally doesn't believe in conservation. They think the development of the wilderness is necessary and see it as inevitable." He showed me a book titled "The Yanomami Farce," released in 1995 by the Army's publishing house. The cover depicts a blond, fair-skinned man holding up a mask with the face of a Yanomami man in a feather headdress. The book, written by an Army colonel, argued that the Yanomami were not a real Indigenous community but the invention of an international cabal that intended to take over the Amazon. Bolsonaro promoted the same idea, accusing Greenpeace and environmentalist celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio of being part of this nefarious master plan.

Yet Possuelo was also skeptical of the current government's campaign, pointing out that Lula had acted after a Supreme Court judge ordered the government to remove the miners. "The fact is that the Brazilian state has never liked the Indians," he said. "The left doesn't like the Indians, and the right doesn't like the Indians, and the center doesn't like the Indians, either."

One afternoon, as we approached a mine from the air, a crew of panicked miners went running into the forest. One of them fell over a log, scrambled to his feet, and took off again. As I followed their progress, something caught

my eye: two dazzling macaws, flying away from the commotion. After we landed, I found macaw feathers, yellow and blue, hanging on a string from a pole in the camp. Cabral shook his head and said that the *garimpeiros* must have hunted and eaten the bird. "The animals die a silent death," he said mournfully.

For a public servant, Cabral is unusually outspoken—at least on Instagram, where his account is devoted to denouncing animal cruelty. In one recent post, he shared a photograph of someone's pet parrot, with green feathers tinged yellow. "This is mistreatment," he wrote. "The yellow pigmentation indicates nutritional deficiency. A trained environmental agent would notice and fine the person responsible."

At the camp, Finger told Cabral that he had found signs of an active site deeper in the forest. We followed him, moving silently along a path through the woods. As we advanced, we could hear a dog barking. Finger scouted ahead, then crept back and motioned for us to follow. In a clearing, there was a wooden shack and a cookhouse, abandoned except for a black dog with distended teats, yowling in distress. Then we heard a peculiar squalling from a box next to the shack. Cabral lifted a plastic cover, revealing a mass of wriggling puppies, just a few days old. He picked up a couple and held them, then walked to a rack where the miners had been drying bush meat—tapir, he guessed. He threw a piece to the mother dog, which began devouring it.

The team searched through belongings, but no one poured gas or piled up flammables. Were they going to burn the place? I asked. The men didn't answer; they were looking at Cabral, fussing over the puppies. Eventually, Finger barked, "Let's go." As the team fell in, Cabral told me that they were leaving the camp intact because of the puppies: "We could move them away from the shack, but the mother might run away in fright and not be able to find them afterward." One of the men joked that, if there had been a child in the camp instead of the puppies, they would have burned the shack. Cabral laughed and shook his head, but he didn't protest.

Early in his career, Cabral acquired the nickname Rambo, but it seemed mostly like a joke. He had taken up armed patrols only in service of wildlife conservation, his lifelong passion. He came from Juiz de Fora, a city in Brazil's interior, and spent his childhood immersed in nature, watching wildlife programs and reading about animals. "This is all I ever wanted to do," he told me. He earned a degree in biology and another in ecology, then joined IBAMA, a branch of the environment ministry that protects threatened ecosystems.

Working in the Amazon, Cabral became increasingly aware that ecological abuses converged with other crimes: gunrunning, drug trafficking, homicides. But the Brazilian government dealt with these things through a patchwork of federal bureaucracies and police agencies, with no force that had both the requisite scientific knowledge and military-style training. In 2013, Cabral secured approval to build a unit of rangers who were committed to saving the environment, by force if necessary. The

TODAY, MY HOPE IS VERTICAL

Today, my hope is vertical.
Tomorrow it will be horizontal.
The next day, cloudy.
My hope is like a Greek myth:
exchanging skin for bark,
bark for scales,
scales for the hollow bones of a bird.
In these ways my hope
attempts to escape its fate.
In myth, hope surely knows,
escape is useless.
Still, hope will try.
I, who will someday leave behind
this three-dimensioned puzzle,
pity my hope.
Poorling, I say to my hope,
even I cannot spare you,
even I cannot make you mortal.
Winged, rooted, finned,
roofed or roofless,
of all my shapes, only you, hope,
know nothing of irony,
only you cannot be cynical
or cloak yourself
in the objectivity of grammar.
Only you
cannot suffer suffering.
You exempt, you deny,
you protest with speech and with silence.
You forgive—helpless to not—
in speech and in silence.
I, citizen of perspective,
born into the tribe of time,
will vanish into its blurring distance.
But you—most intransigent,
most stubborn of all my parts—
will be forced to continue.
How tenderly, with two open hands,
you reach again today for hunger's apple.

—Jane Hirshfield

next year, he was shot in the shoulder when he and his men surprised illegal loggers in the woods; he was back at work in less than two months.

The members of the G.E.F. are biology nerds who found themselves carrying guns—a gang of jungle Ghostbusters. They undergo intensive training, developed by a specialized police unit that fights organized crime. "There are courses on weaponry and shooting, survival in operational environments, vertical activities, and aerial operations," Finger said. "We had a tactical-entry course, but adapted to our reality—they focus mostly on urban operations, while we focus on rural areas, forest environments." IBAMA has twenty-eight hundred employees, but very few apply for the training, and fewer still qualify. Out of the twenty or so who tried out most recently, Finger said, only four were accepted.

Finger had the physique and the temperament of a natural athlete. Growing up in the city of Cuiabá, in Brazil's farm belt, he had played soccer well enough to consider a career, but ended up emulating his father, who ran the forestry-engineering department at the local university. Even working in ecology, he was drawn to action. "If I had stayed in soccer, I'd have played offense," he said, laughing. After college, he had found his way to IBAMA and helped establish the G.E.F.

Most members of his team had graduate degrees in the sciences. Renato, a muscular man of thirty-four with a shaved head, had specialized in fish ecology. During raids, he did a lot of the heavy lifting, keeping up a cheerful patter as he destroyed mine equipment; other times he fixed engines. Alexandre, forty-eight and the father of two young girls, had worked in a national park and in fisheries regulation before taking the G.E.F. training course. "I'd never imagined working with weapons," he said, but he had shown an unexpected aptitude. He was generally a guard, calmly scrutinizing the surrounding forest with a gun at his shoulder.

The only nonscientist was Marcus—a former lawyer, forty-two, tall and rangy, with an easygoing manner. At the headquarters, in Brasília, he procured weapons and ammunition for the group; in the field, he was often a guard. Growing up in the interior province of Goiás, he aspired to be a photographer for skate magazines, until his parents persuaded him to go to law school instead. Halfway through, he attended a ceremony of the União do Vegetal, a Christian sect that incorporates ayahuasca in its sacraments. "During the opening chant, I left my body," he recalled. "I started to see the Amazon rain forest and found myself walking through it in a uniform with a team, while Indigenous people chanted behind me. That moment filled me with joy, and there I discovered the mission of my life."

In Brasília, I met Lula in his office, a capacious room with a corner view of the city. He acknowledged that his administration had allowed the situation in Roraima to deteriorate again. "We should have done something, and we didn't do it," he said. Yet he seemed wary of criticizing the military, whose support he needs to remain in power. Even as he allowed that the armed forces "could have made mistakes," he said, "I don't think we need to single out someone responsible." All the ministries involved had failed, he suggested: "Here in Brazil, we used to say that a dog that has too many owners will starve, because everyone thinks that the other owner gave him food." (He also noted that the armed forces had flown nine hundred and forty missions distributing aid to the Yanomami, and that "not one dumped cargo on anyone's head, as happened in Gaza.")

Part of the problem with policing the territory was its sheer size, he said. There was also the fact that some of the miners are Venezuelans who have crossed the border, which meant that arresting them and blowing up their boats risked creating an international incident. "If we send in the military to take such actions, I could face problems," he said.

The greatest problem, in Lula's telling, was that Bolsonaro had left him a mess. "The state machinery was dismantled—everything that has to do with climate change, everything that has to do with Indigenous people, everything that has to do with environmental conservation," he said. Bolsonaro had reduced IBAMA's staff of rangers by sixty per cent, and had imposed similar cuts at the agencies for Indigenous affairs and the environment. The agencies that worked in the Amazon were handed to archconservative military officers. The environment ministry was given to an advocate of deregulation, who later resigned after being accused of involvement in an illicit logging scheme. (The minister denied any wrongdoing.) FUNAI's Indigenous-outreach department went to an evangelical preacher who had previously sought out isolated groups to convert them. The director he replaced, Bruno Pereira, kept up his work independently. In 2022, he was murdered, along with a British reporter named Dom Phillips, while investigating illegal intrusions in the Javari valley.

During the Bolsonaro years, the G.E.F. struggled with political interference, and for one eight-month stretch was confined to base. Now it had the government's public blessing, but it still didn't have the support it needed. There were vexing limitations on making arrests. "If we catch someone in the act of committing a crime, we can arrest the criminal and take them to the federal police," Finger said. But Brazilian law made it nearly impossible to imprison mine workers, so the G.E.F. detained only those who had what Finger called "relevant strategic interest"—people higher in the command structure, who are rarely in the field. "If it's just a worker at the mining site, we identify them but usually leave them there."

The miners were brazenly aware of the G.E.F.'s limits. On one raid, we flew over a camp on a forested hill, where a man stood blithely watching as we circled. Cabral explained that he had probably deduced, correctly, that there was nowhere for us to land the helicopters. Technology provided another kind of cover. "Wherever the miners have Starlink, we're at a real disadvantage," Finger told me. "They can warn each other there is a raid going on in the territory, and they can organize their work better."

Some members of the G.E.F. felt increasingly that Lula's administration was doing only what was necessary to preserve its image. "There are few people in this government who really care about the conservation of the wilderness," one told me. "Lula is not really an environmentalist himself—it's more that he's worried about international

public opinion." Cabral lamented that, even aside from the Yanomami crisis, obvious solutions to environmental problems were being ignored. If sawmills were properly licensed and monitored, for example, it would hugely reduce illegal logging.

Of course, Cabral said, things had improved since the previous administration. IBAMA was being rebuilt, and its ranks of active rangers had expanded slightly. Nevertheless, there were roughly eight hundred rangers responsible for all of Brazil's regions, including not just the Amazon but also the Pantanal wetlands and the immense Atlantic coastline. The country needed at least five thousand more, Cabral said—yet the salaries were paltry, with the most experienced rangers earning no more than a rookie in the federal police. Cabral himself made about twenty-five hundred dollars a month. Even so, he wouldn't change jobs, he said: "I love what I do." But others were losing patience; not long after my visit, employees at IBAMA and other environmental agencies began to protest by refusing to go on field operations.

Cabral told me how many members the G.E.F. had only after swearing me to secrecy. It was a shockingly low number. Finger, who was listening in, explained, "It's hard to find people who want this kind of life. People want to go to a desk and work for some hours and then go home." I asked Cabral how much bigger the team would need to be in order to flush the miners from Yanomami territory. "With thirty-six men, I could do two operations simultaneously, which would be ideal," he replied. It would still be a small team, but with the right kind of backup, he said, it could achieve a lot. To address all of the mining hot spots around the Amazon, he guessed, the G.E.F. would need at least three hundred and twenty men—many times what he had.

As we walked through the forest on raids, we were shaded by huge trees, and when we emerged into the cleared spaces around mines there was a sudden shock of heat. The signs of extraction were always the same: gouged earth, trees felled and burned, the forest floor stripped to bare soil. The camps were usually crude: stick palisades, covered in black or blue tarps, and open-sided cookhouses littered with charred pots and cans of sardines. On one mess table, I saw a Bible, an acetylene torch with a bottle of mercury, and a supply ledger listing aspirin, ointment for sores, and stomach medication. On another, I saw shotgun cartridges and a pair of black assault rifles. There was often the smell of food being cooked and eaten in close range of stagnant water and places where people shit.

At one mine, Finger led the column up an A.T.V. trail that stretched into the forest, and as we left camp the light grew dimmer and the trill of cicadas swelled. A few hundred feet along the path, two shots cracked through the trees. We all threw ourselves on the ground and waited tensely, until word came down the line that it was Finger who had fired. When we caught up with him, he was still scanning the woods with his weapon ready. He had spotted a man with a gun and had fired before his opponent could. The man had fled, apparently unharmed.

In some ways, the sweeps that Lula ordered last year had only increased the danger for Finger and his men. Most of the impoverished locals who worked in the mines had fled, and many of those who had taken their place were better armed and better funded—often because they were linked to criminal groups. The most fearsome was a São Paulo-based crime syndicate known as the P.C.C., from a Portuguese phrase meaning "First Command of the Capital." The P.C.C., founded in a prison annex known as Big Piranha, had grown into Brazil's largest criminal enterprise, with connections to the Calabrian Mob and a significant presence in the global cocaine trade. Gold prospecting offered the gang both revenue and opportunities to launder drug money.

Early in 2023, the G.E.F. had arrived in Roraima and started collecting intelligence. "In three uninterrupted months acting daily on the ground, we were able to gather a lot of precise information about how the P.C.C. was operating," Finger said. The gang supplied miners with equipment and guns, and also sent its members to supervise and provide security. I saw one video, taken by a terrified, whispering Yanomami man, of heavily armed men hiking up a ravaged riverbed as he hid in the bushes a few feet away. Gang members helped transport gold out of the territory, and in settlements they sold drugs and ran prostitution rings.

On April 30th, G.E.F. members joined a group of federal highway police to raid an encampment occupied by the P.C.C. "The operation took place during the day, on a Sunday," an agent who was involved told me. "It was by helicopter—the only way to reach the area surgically." A river incursion would have been risky: the miners knew the terrain better.

The helicopters that IBAMA supplied for the mission weren't bulletproof, so they dropped the men and left as quickly as they could—"a very quick infiltration to avoid being hit." As the patrol moved through the jungle, gunfire came from off the trail several times. "We knew that the risk of an armed confrontation was real," the agent said. "We had prepared for it, planned for it." Nevertheless, the first burst of gunfire was jarring: "I thought to myself, We have to apply the techniques we've learned and come back alive. We have our families to take care of." In training courses, he said, "there is a bell that you ring when you give up. In the middle of the war, there is no bell."

When the shooting stopped, the government agents were safe and four criminals had been killed. Among them was Sandro Moraes de Carvalho—a gangster known as Presidente, the P.C.C.'s commander in the area. The firefight made national news, drawing attention to the Amazon, and Brazil's minister of justice announced that he was sending in more than two hundred armed officers. "It was the most important action in the history of the G.E.F.," Finger told me.

Finger avoided discussing his more dangerous missions with his wife. "I don't know if she doesn't ask to avoid knowing the details, for psychological reasons—but she doesn't ask, and I don't tell," he said. "If my mother knew, she wouldn't sleep." But he showed few reservations about the use of force. "The idea that criminal groups can take over territory and hold Indigenous people hostage is more than a humanitarian emergency—it is a war," he said. "Indigenous people are just like us, and maybe better than us. But their lives

BIRTHDAY BLUES!
1
THAT'S ENOUGH CAKE.
WAAAH!
IT'S HIS BIRTHDAY!
5
HOW OLD ARE YOU, GRANDMA?
NEVER ASK A WOMAN HER AGE, DEAR.
9½
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DAD!
AH, ONE YEAR CLOSER TO DEATH.
16
CELEBRATING YOUR OWN BIRTHDAY IS SO DESPERATE— WAAAH, PAY ATTENTION TO ME!
21
ZZZ
23
I HAVE TO PARTY ON MY BIRTHDAY. IF I DON'T, I'LL JUST CRY ALL DAY.
NARCISSIST.
27
:SOB:
36
BEING SAD ON YOUR BIRTHDAY IS THE HEIGHT OF ENTITLEMENT! EVERY YEAR IS A GIFT!
40
I'M HEALTHY, :SOB: I'M IN LOVE, :SOB: MY CAREER'S GREAT. :SOB: WHY AM I CRYING?
41
BIRTHDAYS ARE A PERFECT TIME TO GRIEVE. MOURNING IS HOW WE WELCOME CHANGE.
THAT AND TEQUILA.
42
YOU'RE NOT AFRAID THAT IF WE HAVE A KID YOU'LL LOSE YOUR SENSE OF SELF?
I THINK I'M READY TO LOSE SOME.
11 months later
WAAAH!
STRONG LUNGS! :SOB: YOU'RE PERFECT! :SOB:
43
IT'S MIDNIGHT! HAPPY BIRTHDAY, LOVE.
WHY WON'T YOU SLEEP?

are being destroyed. The state needs to come in and protect them and treat them like Brazilians."

The Yanomami do not have a single leader, but Davi Kopenawa, a shaman in his late sixties, is widely acknowledged as their representative to the outside world. Kopenawa, who is sometimes referred to as "the Dalai Lama of the jungle," maintains a home in the forest, but he spends much of his time in Boa Vista, spreading awareness of his people's concerns from the offices of the Hutukara Yanomami Association.

One morning, I visited the association's compound, which overlooked the Rio Branco and was secured with surveillance cameras and a wall topped with electrified razor wire. Past the gate, I found Kopenawa inspecting a small strip of garden that ran between the security wall and the house, which was painted an institutional gray. Barefoot, in shorts and a T-shirt, Kopenawa had wooden plugs in his earlobes and a stick in his hand. He stood scowling at a line of small bushes that had recently been planted next to the wall. In halting Portuguese, he grumbled, "This isn't a real garden. It's the kind of thing white people plant to say they like plants."

Inside, his office walls were hung with photographs of the Yanomami, taken by some of the earliest visitors: a vision of life before the incursion of outsiders. Kopenawa perched in a chair and toyed with a macaw feather on his desk as we talked. I asked if he had thought of going with Lula to the climate conference in Dubai. Kopenawa waved his stick and grimaced. "That's just for white people." He liked Lula, he said, but Lula did not grasp the full extent of what was happening in Yanomami territory. He hadn't even been there—only to Boa Vista, he said chidingly—and little had changed since he had declared the health emergency. In one place, Kopenawa said, the miners had built a road right into their land. In another, they had surrounded a community, razing its forest; now some Yanomami there were working for the miners and had become addicted to drugs.

Kopenawa suggested that the military was being duplicitous. "They just come to make it appear as if everything is all right," he said. "But they're not taking out the miners—they're supporting them." He asked me to pass a message to the President: "Tell Lula that the problems of the Yanomami people have not been resolved, that illegal mining continues, that I am worried about our children. Tell him that criminals with guns have joined the miners—and the police are afraid to go there." He added, "Lula has been travelling a lot all over the world. But he should come here, to our land, which has been invaded. We need his help, too."

The local authorities were worse, Kopenawa said: "They don't like or respect us. All they want is to exploit our land and to rob our forest." He had received death threats, which is why his security wall had been reinforced. The house next door to the association's belonged to an influential senator named Chico Rodrigues, who, like the state's governor, was a Bolsonaro ally. Rodrigues had made news in 2020, when federal police raided his house as part of an investigation into the embezzlement of COVID-19 relief funds. Agents searched him and found more than five thousand dollars' worth of Brazilian cash hidden in his underwear and his clothes. Rodrigues had previously been fined for illegally razing more than fifteen hundred acres of rain forest and converting it into cattle range, but he never paid. (He has maintained his innocence on both counts.)

Back on the street, as I got into a car, a mud-spattered pickup pulled in front of me. A group of rough-looking young men got out and buzzed at the security door of Rodrigues's house, an imposing white multilevel place that loomed over the association's compound. As they were shown in, a Yanomami man in the car with me whispered, "*Garimpo*."

THE POOR LITTLE ENCYCLOPEDIA GIRL
Who will buy my space-consuming, heavy sets of books of information, none of which are updatable?

When I met with Lula, he told me that he hoped to return to Roraima. "It's important to go there again," he said, adding, "We have a human obligation to solve this issue." Despite the increasing problems in the region, he spoke energetically of his plans. His administration recently passed an emergency measure that allocated more than two hundred million dollars to efforts in the Yanomami territory. "We're going to hire more federal police," he said. "We're going to hire more armed forces." In order to facilitate a more coherent response, his administration had set up

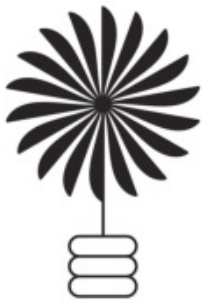
a multi-agency "coördinating center" in Boa Vista, run by one of his close loyalists; it opened in mid-March. "Six months from now, you come back to Brazil and we'll have another conversation," Lula assured me.

Marina Silva, Lula's environment minister, suggested that the concerns would be difficult to address. When I visited her office, she was preparing for the latest climate-change summit, where she would appear alongside Lula. She looked exhausted. Silva, the daughter of an Amazonian rubber tapper, is a bespectacled woman with an ethereal presence who has spent decades leading efforts to safeguard Brazil's wilderness. She served as Lula's environment minister during his first tenure, and although she succeeded in fighting deforestation, differences emerged between them over a series of infrastructure projects, which included a huge hydroelectric dam and a major road in the rain forest. She finally resigned, citing "growing resistance by important sectors of the government and society." Still, after the calamitous Bolsonaro Presidency, she had agreed to rejoin Lula, in the hope of repairing the damage.

In her office, Silva chose her words carefully, saying, "There have been some advances and also challenges." Lula's first advance, obviously, was the "reëstablishment of democracy." Immediately after taking office, she pointed out, he had signed five decrees to protect the environment. Yet his administration had also auctioned off oil- and gas-drilling rights in nearly two hundred areas; there is talk that Lula may authorize the paving of a five-hundred-mile-long road through the rain forest.

A large portion of Brazil's exports rely on farming and natural-resource extraction, and implementing a policy of "zero deforestation" would require rebuilding the economy. Silva acknowledged that there was "no magic key" to changing a development model that was three hundred years old. "It will require pressure, sustained policies, and also sustained investment," she said. Unless the government found ways to provide economic solutions for its citizens, its plans would be doomed, she suggested. The only way forward was to be "sustainable," and to "create an environmental consciousness among Brazilians." She was talking, in effect, about a revolutionary change in the way her country's citizens imagined their lives.

On the morning of our last raid, the rain in the jungle was too heavy to fly in, so we had to wait out the storm at a new refuelling point—a farm farther into the forest. The last place had fallen through; the owner, under pressure from his *garimpo* neighbors, had told the team to refuel elsewhere. The new farm had a Starlink connection, and, as the rains abated, a pilot said that he was sure the farm manager would warn the miners that we were coming.



He was right: at the first target site, the *garimpeiros* were speeding away on A.T.V.s by the time we approached. We found a string of mines, connected by trails, with two airstrips carved out of the forest. A stretch of riverbank perhaps two miles long had been smashed and ruined. Marcus, the former lawyer, said that G.E.F. members often told themselves, "We won't end the degradation of the Amazon—we will only postpone the end of the Amazon." As we hiked around one of the mine pits, he confessed that he feared that "the Yanomami jungle would become like Rio, all of it in the hands of criminal organizations."

On our flight back, my pilot, Franke, found a radio frequency where *garimpo* pilots were talking. As we listened, one gave his coördinates to another. Franke's co-pilot traced them to an airstrip in the woods—just a few miles from the G.E.F. team's new refuelling point. Franke passed the information to Finger, in the other helicopter, and they agreed to try to intercept the plane before it could take off.

The laws concerning intercepting planes are intricate. "I can set fire to clandestine airstrips but not shoot planes down," Finger told me. Aircraft discovered on the ground can be destroyed or flown to Boa Vista, though there was no way of knowing that they were in good enough condition to make the trip safely. The best hope was to apprehend the people on board. "When we manage to get our hands on the pilot, we take them into custody," Finger said.

As we approached the airstrip, the *garimpo* plane, a Cessna, quickly took off, heading farther into Yanomami territory. Finger and Franke raced after it, as the *garimpeiro* pilot took evasive action—banking hard to the left, then dropping down till his plane almost brushed the treetops.

While the Cessna sped above the forest, we chased after it, listening to its pilot shouting over the radio, "He's on my back!" But the *garimpeiro* stayed tauntingly ahead of us; as Franke explained, our chopper's top speed was the same as the Cessna's. Franke watched the fuel gauge anxiously as he flew. We'd started the chase with not much more gas than we needed to get back to base, and the needle was dropping fast. Finally, Finger had to peel away, and soon afterward so did we. As we watched, the plane flew on into the jungle.

Despite these kinds of frustrations, the G.E.F. team maintained a stubborn resolve. Alexandre, the fisheries expert, told me, "In the remote areas where we work, our efforts have consequences—we manage to halt encroachment. Even if it's a little ant's work, it's possible to see the progress." But Finger described their efforts as a zero-sum game. As the G.E.F. chased out miners from Roraima, others were encroaching on Kayapó territory, and on protected Munduruku land. An Indigenous settlement called Sararé, on the Bolivian border, was increasingly worrisome. "The feeling of fighting a losing battle is constant," Finger said.

On one raid, Franke slowed the rotors and pulled into a wide circle over the forest, gesturing for me to look out the window. Below us was a clearing, with a circle of lean-tos at the center. According to Franke's G.P.S., it was the same *maloca* the miners had flown over two weeks earlier, terrifying the *isolados* in the TikTok video. There was no sign of life now; the *maloca* appeared abandoned.

As we flew away, Franke pointed down again. I could see a river, its muddy banks gouged and punched, with shining pools of stagnant water—the signs of a mining operation. I asked him how far we were from the *maloca*. "One point seven kilometres," he said. The mine was deserted, and the miners were gone, for now. But so, it seemed, were the Yanomami. ♦

After Vincent moved to Pittsburgh, he bought a car and several guns, and was baptized in two different churches. Not all students

adapted as quickly.

ILLUSTRATION BY JUN CEN

A REPORTER AT LARGE

OPPORTUNITY COST

How Chinese students experience America.

BY PETER HESSLER

In my composition class at Sichuan University, in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu, the first assignment was a personal essay. I gave some prompts in case students had trouble coming up with topics. One suggestion was to describe an incident in which the writer had felt excluded from a group. Another was to tell how he or she had responded when some endeavor went unexpectedly wrong. For the third prompt, I wrote:

> Have you ever been involved in a situation that was extremely threatening, or dangerous, or somehow dramatic? Tell the story, along with what you learned.

It was September, 2019, and the class consisted of engineering majors who were in their first month at university. Like virtually all Chinese undergraduates, they had been admitted solely on the basis of scores on the *gaokao*, the national college-entrance examination. The *gaokao* is notorious for pressure, and most of my students chose to write about some aspect of their high-school experience. One girl described a cruel math instructor: "He is the person whose office you enter happily and exit with pain and inferiority." Edith, a student from northern Sichuan Province, wrote about feeling excluded from her graduation banquet, because her father and his male work colleagues hijacked the event by giving long-winded speeches that praised one another. "That's what I hate, being hypocritical as some adults," she wrote.

Few students chose the third prompt. Some remarked that nothing dangerous or dramatic had ever happened, because they had spent so much of their short lives studying. But one boy, whom I'll call Vincent, submitted an essay titled "A Day Trip to the Police Station."

The story began with a policeman calling Vincent's mother. The officer said that the police needed to see her son, but he wouldn't explain why. After the call, Vincent tried to figure out if he had committed some crime. He was the only student who wrote his essay in the third person, as if this distance made it easier to describe his mind-set:

> He was tracing the memory from birth to now, including but not limited to [the time] he broke a kid's head in kindergarten, he used V.P.N. to browse YouTube to see some videos, and talked with his friends abroad in Facebook and so on. Suddenly he thought of the most possible thing that happened two years ago.
>
> In the summer vacation in 2017, he bought an airsoft gun in the Internet, which is illegal in mainland China but legal in most countries or regions. Although it had been two years since then, he left his private information such as the address and his phone number. In modern society, it is possible to trace every information in the Internet and [especially] easy for police.

Vincent's parents both worked *tizhinei*, within the government system. The boy approached his father for advice, and the older man didn't lecture his son about following the rules. Vincent described their exchange:

> "If you are asked about this matter," dad said, "you just tell him that the seller mailed a toy gun and you were cheated. And then you felt unhappy and threw it away."
>
> Sure enough, two policemen came to his home the next day.

Vincent stood about six feet tall, a handsome boy with close-cropped hair. He always sat in the front of the class, and he enjoyed speaking up, unlike many of the other engineers, who tended to be shy. On the first day of the term, I asked students to list their favorite authors, and Vincent chose Wang Xiaobo, a Beijing novelist who wrote irreverent, sexually explicit fiction.

As with many of his classmates, Vincent hoped to complete his undergraduate degree in the United States. I was teaching at the Sichuan University–Pittsburgh Institute, or SCUPI. All SCUPI classes were in English, and after two

or three years at Sichuan University students could transfer to the University of Pittsburgh or another foreign institution. SCUPI was one of many programs and exchanges designed to direct more Chinese students to the U.S. In the 2019-20 academic year, Chinese enrollment at American institutions reached an all-time high of 372,532.

Nobody in Vincent's section had previously studied in the U.S. Almost all of them were middle class, and they often said that their goal was to complete their bachelor's degree in America, stay on for a master's or a Ph.D., and then come back to work in China. A generation earlier, the vast majority of Chinese students at American universities had stayed in the country, but the pattern changed dramatically with China's new prosperity. In 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Education reported that, in the past decade, more than eighty per cent of Chinese students returned after completing their studies abroad.

Vincent also intended to make a career in China, but he had specific plans for his time in the U.S. Once, during a class discussion, he remarked that someday he would purchase both a car and a real firearm. The illegal airsoft pistol that he had acquired in high school shot only plastic pellets. In 2017, when Vincent ordered the gun, it had been delivered to his home at the bottom of a rice cooker, as camouflage. At the time, such subterfuges were still possible, but the government had since cracked down, as part of a general tightening under Xi Jinping.

In Vincent's essay, he was surprised that the two policemen who arrived at his home didn't mention the forbidden gun. Instead, they accused him of a much more shocking crime: spreading terrorist messages.

"That's ridiculous," Vincent said. "I have never browsed such videos, not to mention posted them in the Internet. You must be joking."

"Maybe you didn't post it by yourself," the policeman said. "But the app may back up the video automatically."

Vincent admitted that once, in a WeChat group, he had come across a terrorist video. The police instructed him to get his I.D. card and accompany them to the station. After they arrived, they entered a room labelled "Cybersecurity Police," where Vincent was impressed by the officers' politeness. ("It's not scary at all, no handcuffs and no cage.") The police informed him that they had found a host of sensitive and banned material on his cloud storage:

"But how interesting it is!" the policeman said. "They sent pornographic videos, traffic accident videos, [breaking news] videos, and funny videos."

"Yes," he said helplessly, "so I am innocent."

"Yes, we believe you," the policeman said. "But you have to [sign] the record because it is the fact that you posted the terrorism video in the Internet, which is illegal."

On one level, the essay was terrifying—Chinese can be imprisoned for such crimes. But the calm tone created a strange sense of normalcy. The basic narrative was universal: a teen-ager makes a mistake, finds himself gently corrected, and gains new maturity. Along the way, he connects with the elders who love him. Part of this connection comes from what they share: the parents, rather than representing authority, are also powerless in the face of the larger system. The essay ended with the father giving advice that could be viewed as cynical, or heartwarming, or defeatist, or wise, or all these things at once:

"That's why I always like to browse news [but] never comment on the Internet," father said. "Because the Internet police really exist. And we have no private information, we can be easily investigated however you try to disguise yourself. So take care whatever you send on the Internet, my boy!"

From this matter, Vincent really gained some experience. First, take care about your

account in the Internet, and focus on some basic setting like automatic backup. Besides, don't send some words, videos, or photos freely. In China, there is Internet police focus on WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and other software. As it is said in *1984*, "Big Brother is watching you."

More than twenty years earlier, I had taught English at a small teachers' college in a city called Fuling, less than three hundred miles east of Chengdu. The Fuling college was relatively low in the hierarchy of Chinese universities, but even such a place was highly selective. In 1996, the year that I started, only one out of twelve college-age Chinese was able to enter a tertiary educational institution. Almost all my students had grown up on farms, like the vast majority of citizens at that time.

In two years, I taught more than two hundred people, not one of whom went on to live abroad or attend a foreign graduate school. Most of them accepted government-assigned jobs in public middle schools or high schools, where they taught English, as part of China's effort to improve education and engage with the outside world. Meanwhile, the government was expanding universities with remarkable speed. In less than ten years, the Fuling college grew from two thousand undergraduates to more than twenty thousand, a rate of increase that wasn't unusual for Chinese institutions at that time. By 2019, the year that I returned, China's enrollment rate of college-age citizens had risen, in the span of a single generation, from eight per cent to 51.6 per cent.

When I had first arrived, in the nineties, I believed that improved education was bound to result in a more open society and political system. But in Fuling I began to understand that college in China might work differently than it did in the West. Students were indoctrinated by mandatory political classes, and Communist Party officials strictly controlled teaching materials. They were also skilled at identifying talent. In "River Town," a book that I wrote about teaching in Fuling, I described my realization that the kind of young people I once imagined would become dissidents were in fact the most likely to be co-opted by the system: "The ones who were charismatic, intelligent, farsighted, and brave—those were the ones who had been recruited long ago as Party Members."

This strategy long predated the Communists. China's imperial examination system, the ancestor of the *gaokao*, was instituted in the seventh century and lasted for about thirteen hundred years. Through these centuries, education was closely aligned with political authority, because virtually all schooling was intended to prepare men

for government service. That emphasis stood in sharp contrast with the West, where higher learning in pre-modern times often came out of religious institutions. Elizabeth J. Perry, a historian at Harvard, has described the ancient Chinese system as being effective at producing "educated acquiescence." Perry used this phrase as the title for a 2019 paper that explores how today's Party has built on the ancient tradition. "One might have expected," she writes, "that opening China's ivory tower to an infusion of scholars and dollars from around the world would work to liberalize the intellectual climate on Chinese campuses. Yet Chinese universities remain oases of political compliance."

At Sichuan University, which is among the country's top forty or so institutions, I recognized some tools of indoctrination that I remembered from the nineties. Political courses now included the ideas of Xi Jinping along with Marxism, and an elaborate system of Party-controlled *fudaoyuan*, or counsellors, advised and monitored students. But today's undergraduates were much more skilled at getting their own information, and it seemed that most young people in my classes used V.P.N.s. They also impressed me as less inclined to join the Party. In 2017, a nationwide survey of university students showed decreased interest in Party membership. I noticed that many of my most talented and charismatic students, like Vincent, had no interest in joining.

But they weren't necessarily progressive. In class, students debated the death penalty after reading George Orwell's essay "A Hanging," and Vincent was among the majority, which supported capital punishment. He described it as a human right—in his opinion, if a murderer is not properly punished, other citizens lose their right to a safe society. Another day, when I asked if political leaders should be directly elected, Vincent and most of his classmates said no. Once, I asked two questions: Does the Chinese education system do a good job of preparing people for life? Should the education system be significantly changed? Vincent and several others had the same answer to both: no.

The students rarely exhibited the kind of idealism that a Westerner associates with youth. They seemed to accept that the world is a flawed place, and they were prepared to make compromises. Even when Vincent wrote about his encounter with the Internet police, he never criticized the monitoring; instead, his point was that a Chinese citizen needs to be careful. In another essay, Vincent described learning to control himself after a rebellious phase in middle school and high school. "Now, I seem to know more about the world," he wrote. "It's too impractical to change a lot of things like the education system, the government policies."

"O.K., go long, and then go about a hundred feet to your left or your right—who knows?"

• •

Vincent took another class with me the following fall, in 2020. That year, China had a series of vastly different responses to COVID. Early on, Party officials in Wuhan covered up reports of the virus, which spread unchecked in the city, killing thousands. By February, the national leadership had started to implement policies—strict quarantines, extensive testing, and abundant contact tracing—that proved highly effective in the pre-vaccination era. There wasn't a single reported case at Sichuan University that year, and we conducted our fall classes without masks or social distancing. Our final session was on December 31st, and I asked students to write about how they characterized 2020. Vincent, like more than seventy per cent of his peers, wrote that it had been a good year. He described how his thinking had evolved after observing the initial mistakes in Wuhan:

> Most people held negative attitudes to the government's reaction, including me. Meanwhile, our freedom of expression was not protected and the supervision department did a lot to delete negative news, critical comments, and so on. I felt so sad about the Party and the country at that time.
>
> But after things got better and seeing other countries' worse behaviors, I feel so fortunate now and change my idea [about] China and the Party. Although I know there are still too many existing problems in China, I am convinced that the socialist system is more advanced especially in emergency cases.

In 2021, after suspending visa services for Chinese students during the pandemic, the U.S. resumed them. Throughout the spring, I fielded anxious questions from undergraduates who were thinking about going to America. One engineer itemized his concerns in an e-mail:

> 1. How to feel or deal with the discrimination when the two countries' relationship [is] very nervous?
>
> 2. What are the root causes [in] America

to cause today's situation (drugs; distrust of the government, unemployment, and the most important, racial problem)?

They generally worried most about COVID, although guns, anti-Asian violence, and U.S.-China tensions were all prominent issues. One student who eventually went to America told me that in his home town, in northeastern China, ideas about the U.S. had changed dramatically since his childhood. "When people in the community went to America, the family was proud of them," he said. "But this time, before I went, some family members came and they said, 'You are going to the U.S.—it's so dangerous!'"

Vincent's mother was on a WeChat group for SCUPI parents, and that spring somebody posted an advisory from the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C.:

> Since the COVID pandemic, there have been successive incidents of discrimination and violent crimes against Asians in some cities in the United States. . . . On March 16, three shooting incidents occurred in Atlanta and surrounding areas, killing 8 people, of whom 6 were Asian women, including 1 Chinese and 1 Chinese citizen. . . . When encountering such a situation, you must remain calm, deal with it properly, try to avoid quarrels and physical conflicts, and ensure your own safety.

That month, Vincent told me that he planned to buy a .38 revolver after arriving in Pittsburgh. He had already researched how to acquire a hunting license and a firearm-safety certificate. In July, a month before he was scheduled to leave, I had dinner with his mother. She said that she worried about gun violence and racial prejudice. "Lots of people say that now in America you can't rise to the highest level if you are Chinese," she said.

Vincent's mother was born in 1974, the same year as many of the people I had taught in Fuling. Like them, she had benefitted from a stable government job during the era of China's economic boom. She and her husband weren't rich, but they were prepared to direct virtually all their resources toward Vincent's education, a common pattern. Edith, the girl who wrote about her graduation banquet, told me that her parents were selling their downtown apartment and moving to the suburbs in order to pay her tuition at Pittsburgh—more than forty thousand dollars a year. Like Vincent, and like nearly ninety per cent of the people I taught, Edith was an only child. Her mother had majored in English in the nineties, when it was still hard to go overseas. After reading "Gone with the Wind" in college, she had dreamed of going abroad, and now she wanted her daughter to have the opportunity.

At dinner with Vincent's mother, I asked how his generation was different from hers.

"They have more thoughts of their own," she said. "They're more creative. But they don't have our experience of *chiku*, eating bitterness."

Even so, she described Vincent as

DEATH

flashed her brights at me.
She was driving straight into the sun.
Her dark glasses flared
as she went by.

Midday wintering light
oiled gently up every tree,
half-brightening, half-
darkening,

stones here and there in walls
picked out & pointed to
by the adamant
winter sun,

and the branches in the air, and the branches draped across the roads
as shadows
were siblings of a kind
I didn't want to think about.

I wondered why she flashed,
had I made a mistake,
I knew this place was full of mistakes,
it was the most beautiful day ever,

the burning bush was extravagantly presenting
fables to the daylight, the holly
knowing it had *forever*
took on its wicked shine, and the vines

up the old chestnuts
were liquid and calm—
the most beautiful day ever—
the white picket fences

plucked slowly by the minutes shone
limits & boundaries
we no longer understood,
even the dead trees in the woods

confounded the
imagination. Why
did she flash
when she crossed me,

had I missed some clue, gone back on
some vow, dropped the
governing stitch, the note, the ID
paper for the court

date—am I
speeding—am I accidentally unbandaging
the wound—am I mis-
understanding solitude—is joy a

mistake now

as I snake between the shadows and the untouchable

brightnesses the leaf-emptied forests
cast on my face—
might I avoid the whole drama of
being

alive where a flaming tree-crown is visible in the distance

beyond the dead stands, or
am I lucky, time is
so narrow, I could so easily
have missed

her turning & flashing
on this planet just now itself
turning &

flashing

something shown us then instantly

pocketed again
into its folds
by some excited icy force we
almost see

go by

in this flash.

—Jorie Graham

hardworking and unafraid of challenges. I saw these qualities in many students, which in some ways seemed counterintuitive. As only children from comfortable backgrounds who had spent high school in a bubble of *gaokao* preparation, they could have come across as sheltered or spoiled. But the exam is so difficult, and a modern Chinese childhood is so pressured, that even prosperous young people have experienced their own form of *chiku*.

They often seemed eager for a change of environment. In my classes, I required off-campus reporting projects, which aren't common at Chinese universities. Some students clearly relished the opportunity to visit places that otherwise may have seemed illicit or inappropriate: Christian churches, gay bars, tattoo parlors. Occasionally, they travelled far afield. One boy in Vincent's year who called himself Bruce, after Bruce Lee, rode a motorcycle several hundred miles into the Hengduan Mountains, at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, to research a road that had been constructed as part of China's supply chain during the Second World War.

Vincent liked interacting with people from different backgrounds, and he researched a massage parlor, a seedy pool hall, and an outdoor marriage market in Chengdu's People's Park. At the marriage market, singles tried to find partners, often with the help of parents and various middlemen. In Vincent's opinion, Chinese parents were too controlling, and young people had spent so much time studying that they had no dating experience. He wrote:

> Because of one-child policy and traditional ideology, many parents consider their children as their treasure which belongs to the parents instead of the children themselves. . . . I hope the future Chinese children can have genuine liberty.

Vincent's mother told me that she and her husband had made a point of allowing their son to decide for himself whether to go to America. But many parents were nervous, including Bruce's father, who didn't want his son to go to the U.S. because of the political tensions with China. In the end, Bruce decided to take a gap year before leaving. The delay was probably fortunate, because while researching the highway in the mountains he drove his motorcycle around a blind curve and was hit by a thirteen-ton dump truck. Bruce and the motorcycle slid beneath the truck; by some miracle, the vehicle came to a halt before killing the boy. I didn't hear about the accident from the police, or the hospital, or anybody at the university. It was characteristic of these hardworking students that the news arrived in the form of an e-mailed request for an extension:

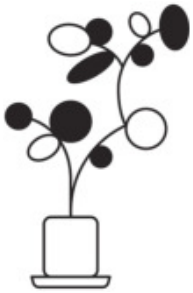
> Dear Prof. Hessler,
> I had an accident on my way to the Lexi Highway. I was turning a corner when I was hit by a truck. Now I have a fracture in my left hand and a piece of flesh has been grinded off my left hand. Then the ligaments and nerves were damaged, and the whole left hand was immobile. My left foot was also injured. It was badly bruised. The whole foot was swollen and couldn't move. I'm in hospital now. I'll have to

stay in the hospital for a while before I can come back. So I may not be able to write the article about the Lexi Highway. I don't know what to do now. Can I write the article at a later date? Because I can't do my research right now. And it's really hard for me to type with one hand.

Best wishes,

Bruce

The first time I saw Vincent in Pittsburgh, in October, 2021, he had lived in America for only eighty-two days, but already he had acquired a used Lexus sedan, a twelve-gauge Winchester shotgun, a Savage Axis XP 6.5 Creedmoor bolt-action rifle, and a Glock 19 handgun. "It's the Toyota Camry of guns," he said, explaining that the Glock was simple and reliable.



Vincent had studied the gun laws in Pennsylvania, learning that an applicant for a concealed-carry permit must be at least twenty-one, so he applied on his birthday. The permit cost twenty dollars and featured a photograph of Vincent standing in front of an American flag. He had also researched issues of jurisdiction. "I can use it in Ohio," he said. "But not in California. I don't like California." One reason he disliked California was that state law follows the Castle Doctrine, which, in Vincent's opinion, provides inadequate protection for gun owners. "Pennsylvania has Stand Your Ground," he said, referring to a law that allows people to defend themselves with deadly force in public spaces. "They made some adjustments to the Castle Doctrine."

Vincent was thriving in his engineering classes, and he said that some of the math was easier than what he had studied in high school in China. His views about his home country were changing, in part because of the pandemic. Vaccines were now widespread, but the Party hadn't adjusted its "zero COVID" strategy. "Their policy overreacts," Vincent told me. "You should not require the government to do too many things and restrict our liberties. We should be responsible for ourselves. We should not require the government to be like our parents."

A couple of times, he had attended Sunday services at the Pittsburgh Chinese Church Oakland, an evangelical congregation that offered meals and various forms of support for students. In China, Vincent had never gone to church, but now he was exploring different denominations. He had his own way of classifying faiths. "For example, a church with all white Americans," he said, referring to his options. "One of my classmates joined that. I think he likes it. He goes every week. He can earn so many profits. Even the Chinese church, they can pick you up from the airport, free. They can help you deliver furniture from some store, no charge. They do all kinds of things!"

In 2021, there were more than fifteen hundred Chinese at the University of Pittsburgh, and around three thousand at Carnegie Mellon, whose campus is less than a mile away. I came to associate the city with Sichuanese food, because I almost never ate anything else while meeting former students. Some of them, like Vincent, were trying to branch out into American activities, but for the most part they found it easy to maintain a Chinese life. Many still ordered from Taobao, which in the U.S. is slower than Amazon but has a much better selection of Chinese products. They also used various Chinese delivery apps: Fantuan, HungryPanda, FreshGoGo. The people I taught still relied heavily on V.P.N.s, although now they used them to hop in the other direction across China's firewall. They needed the Chinese Internet in order to access various streaming apps and pop-music services, as well as to watch N.B.A. games with cheaper subscription fees and Mandarin commentary.

For students who wanted to play intercollegiate basketball, the Chinese even had their own league. An athletic boy named Ethan, who had been in my composition class at Sichuan University, was now the point guard for the Pittsburgh team. Ethan told me that about forty students had tried out and seventeen had made the cut. I asked if somebody like me could play.

"No white people," Ethan said, laughing.

"What about *hunxue'er*?" The term means a person of mixed race.

"I think that works."

One weekend in 2022, I watched Pitt play Carnegie Mellon. Or, more accurately, I watched "UPitt," because that was the name on the jerseys. My father attended Pitt in the late sixties, and I had grown up wearing school paraphernalia, but I had never heard anybody refer to the place as UPitt. The colors were also different. Rather than using Pitt's royal and gold, the Chinese had made up uniforms in white and navy blue, which, in this corner of Pennsylvania, verged on sacrilege: Penn State colors.

The team received no university funding, so it had found its own sponsors. Moello, a Chinese-owned athletic-clothing company in New York, made the uniforms, and Penguin Auto, a local dealership, paid to have its logo on the back, because Chinese students were reliable car buyers.

The Northeastern Chinese Basketball League, which is not limited to the Northeast, has more than a hundred teams across the U.S. On the day that I watched, the Pitt team played a fast, guard-dominated game, running plays that had been named for local public bus lines. "*Qishiyi* B!" the point guard would call out: 71B, a bus that runs to Highland Park. It was the first time I had attended a college basketball game in which the starting forward hit a vape pen in the huddle during time-outs.

The forward was originally from Tianjin, and his girlfriend was the team manager. She told me that she was trying to get him to stop vaping during games. Her name was Ren Yufan, and she was friendly and talkative; she went by the English name Ally. Ally had grown up in Shanghai and Nanjing, but she had attended high school at Christ the King Cathedral, a Catholic school in Lubbock, Texas, where she played tennis. "I was state sixth place in 2A," she said. She noted that she had also been elected prom queen.

Ally often answered questions with "Yes, sir" or "No, sir," and her English had a slight Texas twang. Her parents had sent her to Lubbock through a program that pairs Chinese children with American host families. Ally's host family owned a farm, where she learned to ride a horse; she enjoyed

Lubbock so much that she still returned for school holidays. In the past ten or so years, more Chinese have found ways to enroll their kids in U.S. high schools, in part to avoid *gaokao* agony. In Pittsburgh, my Sichuan University students described these Chinese as a class apart: typically, they come from wealthy families, and their English is better than that of the Chinese who arrive in college or afterward. Their work patterns are also different. Yingyi Ma, a Chinese-born sociologist at Syracuse University, who has conducted extensive surveys of students from the mainland, has observed that the longer the Chinese stay in the U.S. the less they report working harder than their American peers. Like any good Chinese math problem, this distinctly American form of regression toward the mean can be quantified. In Ma's book "Ambitious and Anxious," she reports on her survey results: "Specifically, one additional year of time in the United States can reduce the odds of putting in more effort than American peers by 14 percent."

Ally's boyfriend had attended a private high school in Pennsylvania that cost almost seventy thousand dollars a year, and he drove a Mercedes GLC. "We are using our parents' money, but we can't be as successful as our parents," Ally said. Neither her father nor her mother had attended university, but they had thrived in construction and private business during the era of China's rapid growth. Now the country's economy was struggling, and Ally accepted the fact that her career opportunities would likely be worse than those of the previous generation. Nevertheless, she planned to return to China, because she wanted to be close to her parents. I asked if anything might make it hard to fit in after spending so many formative years in America.

"My personality," she said. "I'm too outgoing."

"There are no prom queens in China, right?"

"No, sir."

By my second visit to Pittsburgh, in November, 2022, Vincent had decided to stay permanently in the U.S., been baptized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and added an AK-47 and two Sig Sauer handguns to his arsenal. He had also downgraded to a less expensive car, because the Lexus had been damaged in a crash. Rather than getting the Glock 19 of automobiles, Vincent decided on the Camry's cousin, a used Toyota Prius. He picked me up in the Prius, and we headed out for a traditional Steel City meal of *lajiao* and prickly ash. Vincent wore a Sig Sauer P365 XL with a laser sight in a holster on his right hip. The car radio was playing "Water Tower Town," a country song by Scotty McCreery:

> In a water tower town, everybody waves
> Church doors are the only thing that's open on Sundays
> Word travels fast, wheels turn slow. . . .

Earlier in the year, some Mormon missionaries had struck up a conversation with Vincent on campus. "Their *koucai* is really good," he told me, using a word that means "eloquence." "It helps me understand how to interact with people. They say things like 'Those shoes are really nice!' And they start talking, and then they ask you a question: 'Are you familiar with the Book of Mormon?'" Now Vincent had a Chinese app for the Book of Mormon on his phone, and he attended services every Sunday. He had been baptized on July 23rd, which was also the day that he had quit drinking and smoking cigarettes, a habit he'd had since Sichuan University. He thought that the church might be a good place to meet a girlfriend. He had a notion that someday he'd like to have a big family and live in a place like Texas, whose gun laws appealed to him.

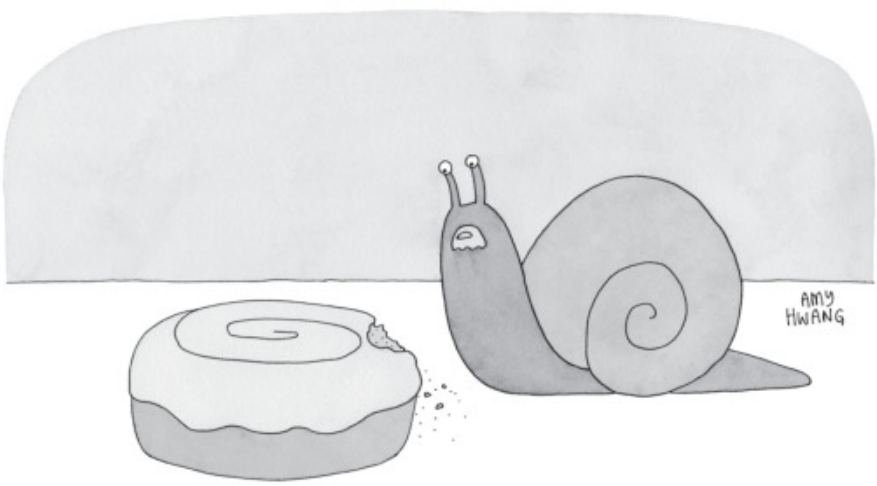
> Corn grows high, crime stays low
> There's little towns everywhere where everybody knows. . . .

During the winter of Vincent's first academic year in the U.S., his political transformation had been rapid. "I watched a lot of YouTube videos about things like June 4th," he told me, referring to the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre, in 1989. He began to question the accommodationist views that he had previously held. "Young people are like this in China," he said. "They tend to support the system."

In the spring of 2022, Vincent became dismayed by the excessive COVID lockdown in Shanghai. He posted a series of critical remarks on social media, and in May he sent me an e-mail:

> In recent months, I make some negative comments on WeChat on the humanitarian crisis caused by the lockdown in Shanghai and some other issues. My parents got nervous and asked me to delete these contents because their colleagues having me in their contact lists in WeChat read my "Pengyou Quan" [friends' circle] and reminded my parents of potential risks of "Ju Bao" [political reporting] that would affect my parents' jobs.

One day, a man who may have been from the Chinese security apparatus phoned Vincent's parents. Unlike in the call from years before, this man didn't identify himself as the police. But he said that Vincent's actions could cause trouble for the family. Such anonymous warnings are occasionally made to the parents of overseas Chinese,



"I'm a monster."

and they weigh heavily on students.

Vincent deleted his WeChat comments. But he also decided that he couldn't imagine returning to China. "I would say something and get arrested," he told me. "I need to be in a place where I have freedom." An older Chinese friend in Pittsburgh had made a similar decision, and he advised Vincent on how to eventually apply for a green card.

Vincent told his parents that he planned to stay in America for at least five years, but initially he didn't say that his decision was permanent, because he worried that they would be upset. In the meantime, he didn't want to waste their money, so he earned cash on the side by teaching Chinese students how to drive. Professional garages charged at least five hundred dollars to install a passenger brake, but Vincent found one on Taobao for about eighty-five dollars, including shipping from China. "I don't know if it's legal," he told me. With his engineering skills, he was able to install the brake in the Prius.

The number of Chinese studying in the U.S. had dropped to the lowest level in nearly a decade. But there were still almost three hundred thousand, and many of them arrived in places like Pittsburgh and realized that *qishiyi* B and other public buses weren't adequate for their needs. They preferred to hire driving instructors who spoke Mandarin, and Vincent's rate was eighty dollars an hour. He charged even more for the use of his car during exams. Vincent told me that a Chinese-speaking driving instructor who hustled could earn at least two hundred thousand dollars a year. In my own business, the Chinese political climate had made it almost impossible for American journalists to get resident visas, and specialists of all sorts no longer had access to the country. Sometimes I envisioned a retraining program for old China hands: all of us could buy passenger brakes on Taobao and set up shop as mandarins of parallel parking.

I knew of only a few former students who, like Vincent, had already decided to make a permanent home outside China. It was viewed as an extreme step, and most of them preferred to keep their options open. But virtually all my former students in the U.S. planned to apply to graduate school here.

They were concerned about the economic and political situation in China, but they also often felt out of place in Pittsburgh. American racial attitudes sometimes mystified them. One engineer had taken a Pitt psychology class that frequently touched on race, and he said that it reminded him of the political-indoctrination classes at Sichuan University. In both situations, he felt that students weren't supposed to ask questions. "They're just telling you how to play with words," he said. "Like in China when they say socialism is good. In America you will say, 'Black lives matter.' They are actually the same thing. When you are saying socialism is good, you are saying that capitalism is bad. You are hiding something behind your words. When you say, 'Black lives matter,' what are you saying? You are basically saying that Asian lives don't matter, white lives don't matter."

It wasn't uncommon for Chinese students to have been harassed on the streets. They often said, with some discomfort, that those who targeted them tended to be Black. Many of these incidents involved people shouting slurs from passing cars, but occasionally there was something more serious. One group of boys was riding a public bus at night when a passenger insulted them and stole some ice cream that they had just bought. Afterward, one of the students acquired a Beretta air pistol. He was wary of buying an actual gun, but he figured that the Beretta looked real enough to intimidate people.

One evening, I went out for Sichuanese food with four former students, including a couple who had been involved in that incident. They seemed to brush it off, and they were much more concerned about Sino-U.S. tensions. One mentioned that if there were a war over Taiwan he would have only three options. "I can go back to China, or I can go to Canada, or I can go somewhere else," he said. "I won't be able to stay here."

"Look at what happened to the Japanese during World War Two," another said. "They put them into camps. It would be the same here."

"How about you wash and dry and I'll curate a dish-washing playlist?"

They all believed that war was unlikely, although Xi Jinping made them nervous. Back in China, my students had generally avoided mentioning the leader by name, and in Pittsburgh they did the same.

"It all depends on one person now," a student said at the dinner. "In the past, it wasn't just one person. When you have a group of people, it's more likely that somebody will think about the cost."

I asked whether they would serve in the Chinese military if there were a war.

"They wouldn't ask people like us to fight," one boy said. He explained that, in a war, he wouldn't return home if his country was the aggressor. "If China fires the first shot, then I will stay in America," he said.

I asked why.

"Because I don't believe that we should attack our *tongbao*, our compatriots."

I knew of only one Pitt student who planned to return to China for graduate school. The student, whom I'll call Jack, was accepted into an aerospace-engineering program at Jiao Tong University, in Shanghai. Jack was one of the top SCUPI students, and in an earlier era he would have had his pick of American grad schools. But Chinese aerospace jobs are generally connected to the military, and American institutions had become wary of training such students. Even if a university makes an offer of admission, it can be extremely difficult to get a student visa approved. "Ten years ago, it would have been fine," Jack told me. "My future Ph.D. adviser got his Ph.D. at Ohio State in aerospace engineering." He continued, "Everybody knows you can't get this kind of degree in the U.S. anymore."

When I met Jack for lunch, I initially didn't recognize him. He had lost twenty pounds, because in Pittsburgh he had adopted a daily routine of a four-mile run. "In middle school and high school, my parents and grandparents always said you should eat a lot and study hard," he said. "I became kind of fat."

He had assimilated to American life more successfully than most of his peers, and his English had improved dramatically. He told me shyly that he had become good friends with a girl in his department. "Some of my friends from SCUPI are jealous because I have a friend who is a foreign girl, a white girl," he said. "They make some jokes."

He said that he would always remember Pittsburgh fondly, but he expected his departure to be final. "I don't think I'll come to the U.S. again," he said. "They will check. If they see that you work with rockets, with the military, they won't let you in."

On the afternoon of January 10, 2023, at around three o'clock, in the neighborhood of Homewood, Vincent was stopped behind another vehicle at a traffic light when he heard a popping sound that he thought was fireworks. He was driving the Prius, and a Chinese graduate student from Carnegie Mellon sat in the passenger seat. Vincent wore a Sig Sauer P365 subcompact semi-automatic pistol in a concealed-carry holster on his right hip. The Carnegie Mellon student was preparing to get his driver's license, and Vincent was taking him to practice at a test course in Penn Hills, an area that was known for occasional crime problems.

At the traffic light, Vincent saw a car approach at high speed and run a red light. Then there were more popping sounds. Vincent realized that they weren't fireworks when a bullet cracked his windshield.

He ducked below the dashboard. In the process, his foot came off the brake, and the Prius struck the vehicle ahead of him. The shooting continued for a few seconds. After it stopped, the Carnegie Mellon student said, "*Ge*, brother, you just hit the car in front!"

"Get your head down!" Vincent shouted. He backed up, swerved around the other vehicle, and tore through a red light. After a block, he saw a crossing guard waiting for children who had just finished the day at Westinghouse Academy, a nearby public school.

"Shots fired, shots fired!" Vincent shouted. "Call 911!"

He parked on the side of the road, and soon he was joined by the driver whose car he had struck. They checked the bumpers; there wasn't any damage. The driver, an elderly woman, didn't seem particularly concerned about the shooting. She left before the police arrived.

A woman from a nearby house came out to talk with Vincent. She remarked that shootings actually weren't so common, and then she walked off to pick up her child from Westinghouse Academy. After a while, a police officer drove up, carrying an AR-15. Vincent explained that he was also armed, and the officer thanked him for the information. He asked Vincent to wait until a detective arrived.

For more than two hours, Vincent sat in his car. The Carnegie Mellon student took an Uber home. When the detective finally showed up, his questions were perfunctory, and he didn't seem interested in Vincent's offer to provide dashboard-camera footage. A brief report about the incident appeared on a Twitter account called Real News and Alerts Allegheny County:

> Shot Spotter Alert for 20 rounds
> Vehicles outside of a school shooting at each other.
> 1 vehicle fled after firing shots.

Later that year, Vincent took me to the site. He recalled that during the incident he had repeatedly said, "Lord, save me!," like Peter the Apostle on the Sea of Galilee. The lack of police response had surprised Vincent. "I didn't know they didn't care about a shooting," he said. For our visit, he wore a Sig Sauer P320-M17 on his right hip. "Normally, I don't open-carry," he said. "But this gun can hold eighteen rounds."

It had been four years since Vincent arrived in my class at Sichuan University. *Have you ever been involved in a situation that was extremely threatening, or dangerous, or somehow dramatic?* Back then, he had written about what happened when the Chinese Internet police came to his home. Now Vincent's American story was one in which the police effectively didn't come after twenty rounds had been fired near a school. But there was a similar sense of normalcy: everybody was calm; nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The following month, four students were shot outside Westinghouse Academy.

I asked Vincent if the incident had

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changed his opinion about gun laws.

"No," he said. "That's why we should carry guns. Carrying a gun is more comfortable than wearing body armor."

At Sichuan University, I also taught journalism to undergraduates from a range of departments. Last June, I sent out a detailed survey to more than a hundred and fifty students. One question asked if they intended to make their permanent home in China. A few weren't certain, but, of the forty-three who answered, thirty said that they planned to live in China. There was no significant difference in the responses of students who were currently in China versus those abroad.

Since the pandemic, there have been increasing reports of young Chinese engaged in *runxue*, or "run philosophy," escaping the country's various pressures by going abroad permanently. A number of my students pushed back against the idea that *runxue* had wide appeal. "I think that's just an expression of emotion, like saying, 'I want to die,'" one student who was studying in Pittsburgh told me. "I don't take it very seriously." He planned to go to graduate school in America and then return home. He said that in China it was easy for him to avoid politics, whereas in Pittsburgh he couldn't avoid the fact that he was a foreigner. During his initial few months in the city, he had experienced three unpleasant anti-Asian incidents. As a result, he had changed the route he walked to his bus stop. "I think I don't belong here," he said.

Yingyi Ma, the sociologist at Syracuse who has surveyed Chinese students in the U.S., has observed that almost sixty per cent of her respondents intend to return to their homeland. She told me that young Chinese rarely connect with the political climate in the U.S. "But what makes America appealing is the other aspects," she said. "The agency. The self-acceptance. Over time, as they stay in the U.S., they figure out that they don't have to change themselves."

One former student told me that she might remain in America in part because people were less likely to make comments about her body. She's not overweight, but she doesn't have the tiny frame that is common among young Chinese women, and people in China constantly remarked on her size. In Pittsburgh, I met with Edith, the student who had written about her graduation banquet. Now she had dyed some of her hair purple and green, and she avoided video calls with her grandparents, who might judge her. Once, she had gone to a shooting range with Chinese classmates, and she had attended church-group meetings out of curiosity. She told me that recently she had taken up skateboarding as a hobby.

It was typical for students to pursue activities that would have been unlikely or impossible in China, and several boys became gun enthusiasts. Nationwide, rising numbers of Asian Americans have purchased firearms since the start of the pandemic, a trend that scholars attribute to fears of racism. One afternoon, I arranged to meet a former student named Steven at a shooting range outside Wexford, Pennsylvania. I knew that I was in the right parking lot when, amid all the pickup trucks, I saw a car with a bumper sticker that said "$E=mc^2$." On the range, whenever the call came for a halt in shooting—"All clear!"—a bunch of bearded white guys in camo and Carhartt stalked out with staple guns to attach new paper covers to the targets. Steven, a shy, round-faced engineer in glasses, was the only Chinese at the range, and also the only person who used quilting pins for his target. He told me that the quilting pins were reusable and thus cheaper than staples. He had come with a Smith & Wesson M&P 5.7 handgun, a Ruger American Predator 6.5 Creedmoor bolt-action rifle, and a large Benchmade knife that he wore in a leather holster. At the range, he shot his rifle left-handed. When he was small, his father had thought that he was a natural lefty, but he was taught to write with his right hand, like all Chinese students. He told me that shooting was the first significant activity in which he had used his left.

On the same trip, I met Bruce for a classic Allegheny County dinner of mapo tofu and Chongqing chicken. After the accident in the Himalayas, Bruce had sworn off motorcycles. At Pitt, in addition to his engineering classes, he had learned auto repair by watching YouTube videos. He bought an old BMW, fixed it up, and sold it for a fifty-percent profit. He used the money to purchase a used Ford F-150 truck, which he customized so he could sleep in the cab for hiking and snowboarding excursions to the mountains. He had decorated the truck with two "thin blue line" American-flag decals and another pro-police insignia around the license plate. "That's so it looks like I'm a *hongbozi*," Bruce said, using the Mandarin translation of

"redneck." "People won't honk at me or mess with me." He opened the door and pointed out a tiny Chinese flag on the back of the driver's seat. "You can't see it from the outside," he said, grinning.

Over time, I've also surveyed the people I taught in the nineties, and last year I asked both cohorts of former students the same question: Did the pandemic change anything significant about your personal opinions, beliefs, or values? The older group reported relatively few changes. Most are now around fifty years old, with stable teaching jobs that have not been affected by China's economic problems. They typically live in third- or fourth-tier provincial cities, which were less likely to suffer brutal lockdowns than places like Shanghai and Beijing.

But members of the younger generation, who are likelier to live in larger cities and generally access more foreign information, responded very differently. "I can't believe I'm still reading Mao Zedong Thought and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," one graduate student at a Chinese university wrote. "In this collectivist ideology, there is no respect for the dignity and worth of the individual." Another woman, who was in graduate school in the United Kingdom, wrote, "Now I've switched to an anarchist. It reduces the stress when I have to read the news."

Their generation is unique in Chinese history in the scope of their education and in their degree of contact with the outside world. But this doesn't necessarily mean that their concerns are broader. In my survey, I asked what they worried about most, and, out of forty-seven responses, three mentioned politics. Another three worried about the possibility of war with Taiwan. Only one cited environmental issues. The vast majority of answers were personal, with more than half mentioning job opportunities or problems with graduate school. This seemed to reflect the tradition of "educated acquiescence": there's no point in concerning yourself with big questions and systemic flaws.

Nevertheless, their worldliness makes it harder to predict long-term outcomes, and I sense a new degree of unease. On a recent trip to California, I interviewed a former student who commented that even when she and her Chinese boyfriend were alone they instinctively covered their phones if they talked about politics, as if this would prevent surveillance. I noticed that, like many other former students, she never uttered the name Xi Jinping. Afterward, I asked her about it over e-mail, and she replied:

> I do find myself avoiding mentioning Xi's name directly in [California], even in private conversations and in places where I generally feel "safe." . . . I guess it's a thing that has been reinforced millions of times to the point that it just feels uncomfortable and daunting to say his full name, as it has too much association with unrestrained power and punishment.

In the survey of my Sichuan University students, I was most struck by responses to a simple query: Do you want to have children someday? The most common answer was no, and the trend was especially pronounced for women, at seventy-six per cent. Other surveys and studies in China indicate a similar pattern. One former student explained:

> I think that Chinese children are more stressed and profoundly confused, which will continue. We are already a confused generation, and children's upbringing requires long periods of companionship and observation and guidance, which is difficult to ensure in the face of intense social pressure. The future of Chinese society is an adventure and children do not "demand to be born." I am worried that my children are not warriors and are lost in it.

By my third visit to Pittsburgh, in November, 2023, Vincent had graduated, been baptized again, and embarked on his first real American job. The previous year, I had attended Sunday services with him at a Mormon church, but this time he took me to the Church of the Ascension, an Anglican congregation near campus. When I asked why he had switched, he used a Chinese word, *qihou*. "Environment," he said. "They aren't pushy. The Mormons are too pushy."

He liked the fact that the Anglicans were conservative but reasonable. He saw politics in similar terms: he disliked Donald Trump, but he considered himself most likely to vote as a traditional Republican if he became a citizen. He had been baptized in the Anglican Church on Easter. "I told them that I had already been baptized," he explained. "But they said that because it was Mormon it doesn't count."

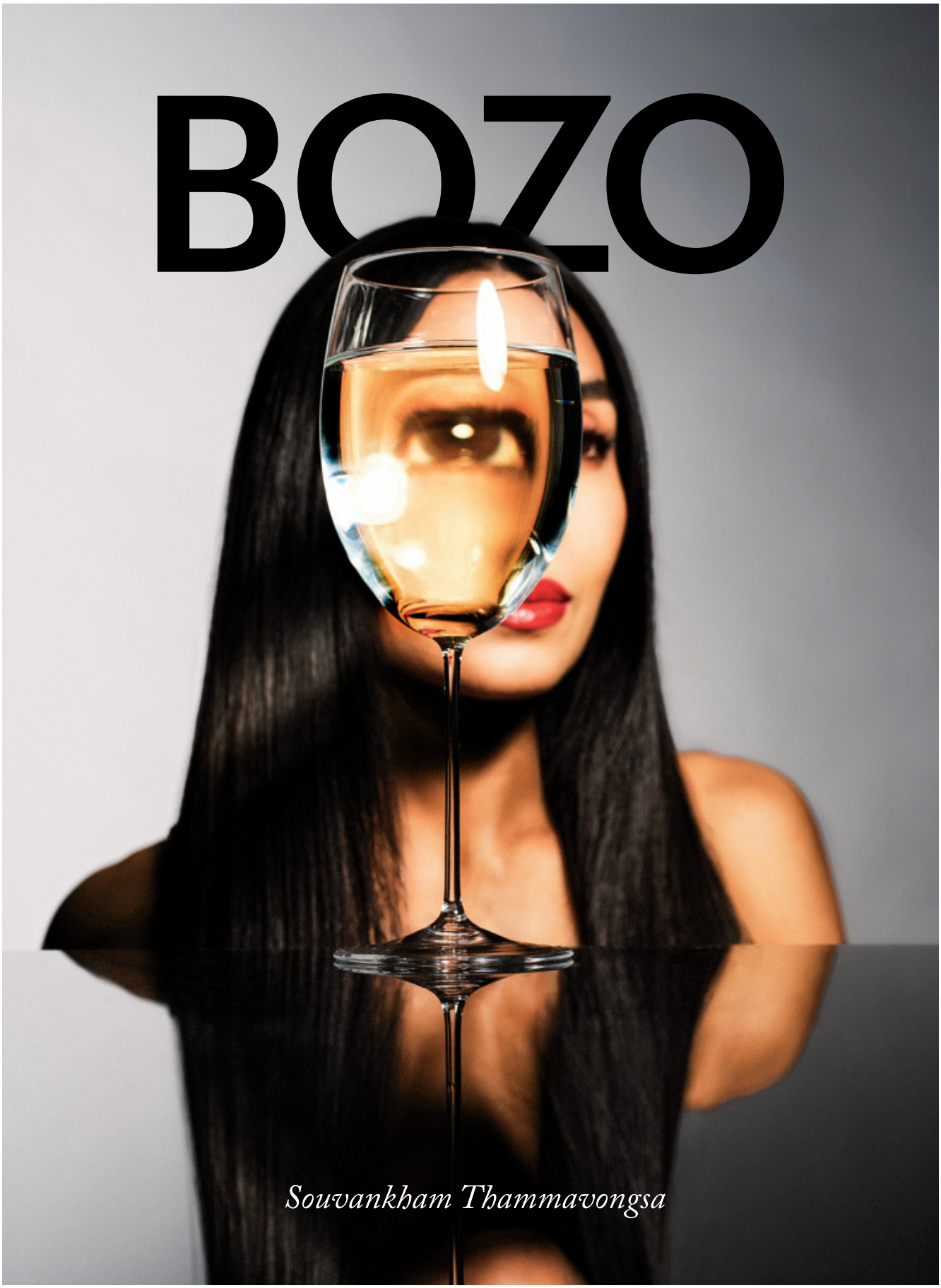
The previous summer, Vincent's mother had visited Pittsburgh, where, among other places, he took her to church and to the shooting range. During the trip, he told her about his plan to live permanently in the U.S. When I spoke with her recently by phone, she still held out hope that he would someday return to China. "I don't want him to stay in America," she said. "But if that's what he wants I won't oppose it." She said that she was impressed by how much her son had matured since going abroad.

After receiving his degree in industrial engineering, Vincent decided not to work in the field. He believed that he was best suited for a career in business, because he liked dealing with all kinds of people. He had started working for his landlord, Nick Kefalos, who managed real-estate properties around Pittsburgh. One morning, I accompanied Vincent when he stopped by Kefalos's office to drop off a check from a tenant.

Kefalos was a wiry, energetic man of around seventy. He told me that on a couple of occasions a roommate had left an apartment and Vincent was able to find a replacement. At one point, he persuaded a Japanese American, a Serbian, and a Dane to share a unit, and all of them had got along ever since. "We could see that he had a knack," Kefalos said. "He was able to find unrelated people and make good matches." Kefalos also liked having a Chinese speaker on staff. "We think a diverse population is ideal," he said. Vincent was currently studying for his real-estate license, and he hoped to start his own business someday.

Kefalos's grandfather had come from Greece, and his father had worked as an electrical engineer in the steel industry. Many of his current tenants were immigrants. "My personal experience is that they are relatively hardworking," he said. "And I think that's true with most immigrants who come into the country. Whether it's for education or a better life." He looked up at Vincent and said, "My sense is that most U.S. citizens born in the United States don't have any idea how fortunate they are." ♦

BOZO



Souvankham Thammavongsa

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOBBY DOHERTY

The man stood in front of an arrangement of bottles and glasses. He knew what everything in those bottles tasted like, and what to pair them with. He was a bartender. He could make a drink for you, if you wanted. All you had to do was lean over and ask.

I wanted something he could make. Something no one else had. I asked him if he could make this for me, and he nodded. I saw him pause and think. What he had in mind seemed to require him to go and look for things. He rummaged through a plastic bag and plucked something out. When he brought the drink to me, it looked like water. In the middle of the drink was a mint leaf in the shape of a heart. The leaf floated there, and then it didn't anymore.

I didn't know how to talk to him. He was right in front of me. Making drinks that other people in the room had asked for. So I just watched him work. That was all he was doing. Working. He was someone who could carry four glasses using the space his palms and fingers could provide. He did this repeatedly. He never fumbled or broke anything. He cut up oranges and limes and lemons. He scooped ice, decorated drinks with straws. He seemed to know what people in the room wanted before they wanted it. From a small machine, next to him, orders spooled like ribbons.

He didn't try to talk to anyone. Didn't walk over and ask anything. Didn't seem curious about anything. A waitress went by, and, though there was plenty of room behind him, she squeezed so close that her chest brushed up against him. And on the way back, when she passed him, she touched his arm. He didn't react either time. Part of the job. No turning around to acknowledge her with a smile. No asking about her shift and how it was going. But she got to touch. She got to be back there, with him.

If I looked at him, he'd look over and smile. If I leaned forward a bit, he'd come to me. It was so easy to get him to pay attention. I wanted to invite him to my place, to ask when his shift was over. But he probably got questions like that every night. Was he a person who went with anyone who asked, or was he more discerning? And what, then, if he came to my place? A few pumps and it would be over. I didn't want a few pumps. I wanted to be something to him. Something that would last more than one night. I don't know why I wanted that, but there it was, that want.

If we'd been online, I could have looked at a still picture. I could have clicked on a heart to let him know I was interested. I could even have sent a message and been direct. And if he didn't reply I could have moved on to the next face. After all, there were hundreds of messages to respond to, and that was just in twenty-four hours. Stacks of faces and bodies offering themselves up. Who knew if any of them were who they said they were? Whether their good looks were a result of well-placed lighting, a flattering angle, an old picture? Were those faces even theirs, and how would I know if what they said about themselves was true? I could only take their word for it.

Out in the wild, like this, what I saw was true. I could see him in any light and at any angle. It was possible to know him. But, really, I didn't want to know him. I liked him at exactly this distance. They all disappoint, eventually, when you get to know them. I just wanted to look and make up stories. I loved that I knew where he was every evening. That I didn't have to wait for a call or a text. If I wanted to see him, I could, and I knew exactly where to go.

For six months, I returned once a week, on Tuesday or Thursday nights. It wasn't so busy, and I could lean over and ask him to make me something. Sometimes I let two or three weeks go by without returning. I didn't want to seem too available. I am a busy girl, after all. And I wanted him to wonder where I was or who I was with. I thought a gorgeous man like that probably gets someone anytime he wants. He just leans over, and women know what he wants. He has probably never spent much time alone or known what being lonely feels like. He's probably never had to long for anything.

Strangely, he seemed shy. Though I don't think that people really are shy. It's just a way of getting you to do all the work.

He wiped the bar top with a cloth.

He was probably someone who knew how to clean at home. Maybe he wouldn't have to be told to do the dishes. He'd keep the glassware spotless. It would gleam behind the doors of the cupboards. And he might even know how to cook. Working in a place like this, he'd see people coming out of the washroom wiping their wet palms on their pants, sneezing into the food, or just breathing heavily onto everything—he probably doesn't want to eat out.

He was so hard to talk to. He said so few words.

But one night he was chatty and spoke to me, because I seemed familiar to him. He knew I had been there before. He told me his name. He said he'd grown up in a small town. So maybe the shyness was real. His days off were Monday and Wednesday.

I asked him about his summer plans. He told me he was sticking around. He said he used to take off to Hawaii for the beaches. I told him that I was going to travel there, and mentioned what I did for work. I wasn't used to saying what I did. I said, "I know that sounds fake, but that's really what I do." He laughed, and mentioned that he used to model. That sounded fake, too, but looking at his face and his body, considering how comfortable he was with being looked at, and the way he let me look at him without it ever having to mean anything, I could tell that he knew how to make his living from someone's gaze.

I wondered how old he was. My guess was maybe early thirties, and I asked him. I was close. He was thirty-eight. I didn't see a ring on his finger. Was he incapable of commitment? Didn't want to commit, ever? Or was it something he wanted but it had never worked out? I liked that he was almost forty. It meant that I wouldn't have to teach him anything or help him become anything. It meant that he wasn't like other men, getting married and starting a family in their twenties, with a house by the time they're thirty. What after that? An affair, to keep it going, or a divorce, for giggles. And, being polite, he never asked me how old I was. I was a few years older than him, but I didn't look it.

Every time I went back to the restaurant, I sat at the bar and watched him work. He never yelled at anyone, and no one spoke unkindly to him. He had a quiet confidence. I was jealous of every drink I saw him make. Those drinks were going to other people's mouths, and I wanted to drink them all before he took them to the tables. When he wasn't making drinks, he served food to all of us sitting at the bar. Nothing special. Pale,

soggy sticks of potato. Things fried in lard. Clumps of meat. That made me feel a terrible sadness for him.

He just wanted to go to the beach once a year. I wanted to give that to him. Actually, I wanted to make it so that he'd never have to come back and serve anyone here again.

I don't know why, but I wanted to give him everything. Where had these feelings come from, and why were they here now? I had them, and I couldn't tell him. I could want so much based on so little. It was smaller than that, even. It was nothing.

A few weeks before, I had been to the aquarium. There really is a place called the abyss, I learned. It's three levels below where sunlight reaches. I don't know how to swim. I would never go diving or snorkelling. You swim toward things and they dart away. You don't get to see anything, really. I like how safe it feels at the aquarium. I can breathe on my own, and look. I don't have to know how to swim or be afraid of drowning.

I thought of a school of fish I saw there that swam together as one giant ball, spinning and spinning. A lobster with three claws. The giant octopus and its three hearts. Jellyfish that glowed. I wanted to go there with him and watch him look at those things. See him in the dark. See if he could be beautiful there, too. It probably seemed like a strange thing to ask someone I'd just met. I leaned over, almost tried, lost my nerve.

He took my leftovers and put them in small containers. There were round paper containers with plastic tops that kept liquids from spilling out. Brown paper boxes for the things that didn't have liquid. He placed them all inside a paper bag and rolled down the top as if it were a gift to me. I looked at what he did for others sitting at the bar who had leftovers. He brought over the same brown paper boxes and plopped them down in front of them. They all had to pack up their own leftovers. He didn't consider whether they might need a round container with a plastic top for any liquids. I wasn't like the others, I thought. Special, I thought.

I returned a few days later and thought that I would try again. Ask him to go to the aquarium with me.

He came over as before, and smiled. I said it. He said he didn't hear me, and turned his left ear to me. I tried again. It felt as if I had to say so many words and a year had passed by the time I finished saying them. I was nervous and scared, and I let it show on my face.

He paused for a moment, and said, "I don't think it's a good idea." I nodded and let him see my disappointment. He added, "I have a girlfriend." I thought of the words "with my girlfriend," which he could have used at any time. An omission like that didn't feel like an accident. Maybe he did it just for tips, to sell a hope to someone. It seemed, if he had a girlfriend, unkind, even cruel.

But I hadn't asked, had I? Instead, I'd asked his age. What he did on his days off. Maybe when you have someone, you see the two of you as one, and so when you say "I" you mean both of you.

I asked, "How long have you been together?" and he told me three years. I thought, Three years is pretty serious, and it should be worth at least a mention.

"I really appreciate it, though," he said, like someone used to being given things when he had so many already.

He walked away, to let me have a moment to myself. I didn't want to slink off. I was hungry, and I wanted to eat, to stuff something into my mouth. An old man sitting next to me at the bar looked at me and said, "I knew he had a girlfriend." He offered more, saying, "I'm from New York. A couple of weeks ago, he took his girlfriend there and he asked me for places to go."

I thought of New York then. I had visited the place many times. I thought of the way people crossed the street. That's what came to mind. The people there don't wait for cars to stop for them. They cross when they want. I thought, too, how lovely it is that they really do trust the one-way signs. They look one way and then start to cross. They actually seem to think that no one will come the other way.

The two of them had gone there, together, and crossed the street like that.

I thought, What happened three years ago? The world had shut down. The pandemic. People had paired up quickly. Survival can feel a lot like love. The way you are forced to need each other. Maybe that was what it was for him. A coming together that was a convenience. And after two years, being that close, even if you didn't love someone, you would then, because the circumstances encouraged it.

I thought of the woman. His girlfriend. Who she was. Whoever she was she was probably like me. She probably wanted him to stop bartending and wanted him to have his beach vacations. It's hard to leave a woman. Women are, for the most part, good people. Nice—and, if they're not nice, people make them feel bad about it, so they have no choice but to learn how to be nice. Attentive and caring. Thoughtful. They take out the garbage, clean the toilets, have dinner on the table, buy you clothes. They're ambitious for you. And they forgive anything, because they allow you your mistakes. You don't even have to try very hard. Just look clean, and pretty.

I wondered if he was unhappy. Being unhappy is comfortable. No one is going to come for your unhappiness, and, really, you don't have to do anything about it if you don't want to. Why give that up? It was his job to be nice to me, to serve me. And I was mistaken. I thought it was interest.

"She comes in on Friday nights," the old man said, offering another detail. "Sits right here."

I thought about that, and I wanted to see for myself.

When I returned to the restaurant, the following Friday, I knew that the woman at the bar was her. His girlfriend. The woman was—as I wanted her to be for him—beautiful. I watched her, and I listened. She kept calling him something. I tried to make out what it was.

"Bozo," she said.

I've heard babes, sweetheart, darling, honey. But bozo I'd never heard before. I knew then that he really did love her. To be a bozo to someone meant that you let them call you anything, and you would be that for them. He wanted to be a bozo.

Then, alone, I got up and left the restaurant. I walked down a dark alley nearby. And there, with my back up against a brick wall, I closed my eyes. I said the thing she'd called him to no one in particular. I wanted what was in her mouth to be in mine, too. ♦

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Souvankham Thammavongsa on adoration.

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE DEVOURING NEON

Mesmerized by the music managers.

BY ANDREW O'HAGAN

On any day of the week, you might find Scooter Braun working his magic in a pair of vintage Reeboks. He has a love of superior kicks, and was among the high-profile investors in StockX, the "stock market for sneakers." He's now forty-two, but some of us can still picture him in 2006, a college dropout riding around Atlanta with a writer from *Creative Loafing*, proclaiming his status as the guy who knows all the guys in the know. Braun, the son of two dentists from Greenwich, Connecticut, was already perfecting his hustle—from basketball courts to boardrooms. "He's hustle concentrate," the hip-hop producer Jazze Pha said. "You ever made Minute Maid out of a can? That's the kind of hustle he's got." And this was before Braun raked in an estimated half a billion dollars from his various efforts, including serving as Justin Bieber's manager. He has also managed Ariana Grande, Carly Rae Jepsen, Idina Menzel, Demi Lovato, and the Kid Laroi. "He is as much the author of the pop music we listen to incessantly as are the

Brian Epstein bled for the Beatles; Colonel Parker made Elvis an icon. But the all-powerful pop impresario is a dying breed.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LINCOLN AGNEW

artists on his roster," Amos Barshad wrote of Braun in "No One Man Should Have All That Power," his 2019 book about behind-the-scenes schemers. "He is, as much as anyone, controlling the last vestiges of the monoculture." But there's reason to wonder whether his profession—like that of lamplighters, town criers, and cigarette girls—might be a thing of the past.

In the twilight hours favored by the owl of Minerva (not to mention the industry's A. & R. scouts), we can now begin to study some vital elements in the job description. Back in the nineteen-forties, the popular-music industry depended on bookers, promoters, and agents, but there was a growing demand for bespoke handling. Nat King Cole found it in the Honduras-born Carlos Gastel, a six-foot bruiser in a pin-striped suit with a pocket square, best known for repping dance bands and the occasional boxer. The two men had been sizing each other up for a while, but the story goes that they became partners at Herb Rose's 331 Club, where Gastel bought Cole out of his performing contract for ten dollars. (Gastel became the manager of many of the key artists from Capitol Records, including June Christy, Nelson Riddle, Peggy Lee, and Mel Tormé.) "Carlos and I thought generally the same way," Cole recalled in 1957. "This is really unusual in an artist-manager relationship. . . . Often the manager has very different ideas from those of the artist." Meanwhile, a new sort of audience was gathering on the horizon, humming a different tune.

The rock-and-roll manager proper, or improper, really begins with Elvis Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, the former carny with the omnipresent cigar, nodding, winking, and fanning his latest flame into a global conflagration. Parker was a huckster—he liked to call Presley "my attraction"—but he never, as far as one can tell, thought of Elvis as anything other than a leg-quivering dynamo who, sooner or later, might be capable of bringing in more than a hundred thousand dollars a week in Vegas. Working the lights from the shadows, Parker was a shambling Svengali, his pockets, one imagines, stuffed with ready cash, matchbooks, and a plethora of calling cards.

A scene in Sofia Coppola's film "Priscilla" shows a young Elvis, sveltely portrayed by Jacob Elordi, settling down on a soft bed with his intended for a spot of heavy petting. He begins by phoning an assistant and telling her to hold all calls, "unless it's from my daddy or an emergency from the Colonel." Among those occasions which life may offer for vital *interruptus*, a message from one's manager must rank fairly low for most of us. But not for Elvis. To him, it appears that professional management was a sort of husbandry of the self, and deferring to the Colonel was the price to be paid for all the blessings he had received. "I knew Colonel Parker for almost four decades," Greg McDonald, who worked for him, writes in "Elvis and the Colonel" (St. Martin's). "I saw first-hand how Colonel Parker worked . . . how he negotiated contracts, and how he made sure there was enough honey to go around." McDonald, displaying company loyalty, depicts Elvis as his own worst enemy and his manager as a simple businessman doing his best. The Colonel's superpower—much mimicked, we are told—was for turning Elvis's bid for glory into huge bundles of cash. The agonies of creation were not the manager's concern. What mattered, McDonald thinks, is that Parker "could sell tickets to see two flies wrestling on a windowpane, and the line would go around the block."

The Colonel was old enough to be Brian Epstein's father, and, in management terms, the distance between them is the journey from the peddler of wares to the custodian of genius. Epstein, a young Liverpool store manager, had turned himself into the Beatles' biggest fan when, in January, 1962, he signed them. He was slightly weak at the knees, and he never gained the steadiness required of hard business. Where Colonel Parker's relationship with Elvis always seemed largely transactional—with a shift in demand, he might readily have swapped out his young buck for a brace of bearded ladies—Epstein had a worshipful attitude toward his most famous clients. They were always "my boys." He told a friend that once, during a big Beatles concert, he slipped into the crowd and screamed like one of the girls, saying it was what he'd wanted to do from the minute he saw them.

In Epstein's 1964 memoir, "A Cellarful of Noise," the young mogul with a silk tie and an Aquascutum coat establishes the credo of all pioneering pop managers from the golden age of twisting and shouting: *I was there, calling the shots*. He wasn't Colonel Parker's equal when it came to making his clients rich, but he was a few steps ahead when it came to protecting them as artists. Nat Weiss, Epstein's American business partner, felt that a great moneyman was not what

"I asked folks to bring whatever they want, so now we have ten tubs of guacamole, no chips, and eight cases of the most obnoxiously flavored hard seltzer."

the band required at that point: "They needed a person who would inspire them, whose neurosis was sufficient for him to identify with them. And for Brian the Beatles were an alter ego." Epstein's sense of sacrifice was always a major part of his character, and, even while he was making sensible managerial moves (pushing the Beatles toward matching suits and clean hair), his notion of being a manager was to bleed himself out. Robert Stigwood, who knew Epstein socially, recalled him saying that what he really wanted to do was manage a *cuadrilla* of bullfighters in Spain.

"Manning the phones, injecting our hustle into every moving thing": that was how Andrew Loog Oldham described his life as the Rolling Stones' manager. Oldham was a King's Road ingénue, a manic child of the fashion boutique. It was Oldham who got Mick Jagger and Keith Richards to write songs, but perhaps his main contribution was to introduce them to Allen Klein, the son of a butcher from New Jersey, who was to accountancy what Colonel Parker had been to the cowboy hat. (He wore it well.) Richards later described their first meeting: "In walks this little fat American geezer, smoking a pipe, wearing the most diabolical clothes." It helped that Klein could make the Stones laugh. "Let's go with someone who can turn everything round," Richards added, "or fuck things up once and for all." Klein came on like a gangster, which was completely shocking to the little gray gentlemen of the British recording industry. "We've got a lot of good people working at this company," Sir Edward Lewis, the head of Decca, once reportedly said to Klein, who replied, "Well, I hope they can sing, because you've lost the Stones."

Klein immediately got the band a better publishing deal, upping their end from fifty-six cents on the dollar to seventy-two. He came in like the man who shot Liberty Valance. "I will succeed because I believe all men are born evil," he apparently said. Having started out as the Stones' moneyman, he'd edged out Oldham by 1967. According to Ray Davies, of the Kinks, the word "bully" doesn't begin to cover it. At one meeting, Davies's lawyer was so horrified by the way Klein was treating the label bosses that he ran from the room in tears. (And Klein was on *his* side.) When Epstein died, of an overdose, in 1967, Klein moved quickly to gain the confidence of John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—Paul McCartney never liked him, preferring his girlfriend Linda Eastman's father and brother. In the end, Klein's efforts at managing the Beatles, appearing to sort out chaotic finances while not having the backing of McCartney, would be added to the accumulating number of reasons they had for splitting up. There would be lawsuits between Klein and the Beatles, and Klein and the Rolling Stones—the latter alleging "mismanagement of funds." He would later be convicted of tax fraud and spend two months in prison.

Rock management, it was becoming clear, was a protection racket. For a high price, the early pop impresarios worked to shield their young charges from the venality of the record labels and the greed of the concert venues; only with time would the artists come to recognize that they also needed protection from their protectors. Bob Dylan's manager Albert Grossman spent a lot of his career hammering out deals for artists who claimed to hate materialism. A Chicago-born son of Russian tailors, Grossman had owned the Gate of Horn, a club in the basement of the Rice Hotel, on Chicago's Near North Side, and he began to manage some of the acts that appeared there. Grossman had already helped start the Newport Folk Festival, in 1959, when he saw Bob Dylan at the Gaslight Cafe, in Greenwich Village. "Whenever he came in, you couldn't help but notice him," Dylan later wrote. "When he talked, his voice was loud, like the booming of war drums." Dylan, signing with him in 1962, appears not to have known about Grossman's deal with the music publishers M. Witmark & Sons, which promised the manager fifty per cent of the publishing income his artists brought in.

Managers who prey on their clients often mask their bad faith with theatrically belligerent displays of loyalty, and Grossman, with his double-breasted suits and comb-worthy eyebrows, was true to type. In "Don't Look Back," D. A. Pennebaker's 1967 documentary about Dylan on tour in England, a hotel manager arrives at Dylan's room to say that there have been complaints about the noise, and Grossman lets loose: "You're one of the dumbest assholes and one of the most stupid persons I've ever spoken to. If we were someplace else I'd punch you in your goddam nose." The theatre could only go so far. "Evidently, Dylan had finally got around to reading all his contracts," Clinton Heylin writes in a new book, "The Double Life of Bob Dylan, Vol. 2, 1966-2021: Far Away from Myself" (Bodley Head). "Please don't put a price on my soul," Dylan implored in his 1967 song "Dear Landlord." His contractual relationship with Grossman would end definitively in 1970.

When Dylan was asked, in a deposition, how long he had known Grossman, he replied, "I don't think I've ever known the man." There were suggestions, alluded to by Dylan in other songs, that the manager had a tendency to keep his clients in a state of narcotic dependency as well as financial uncertainty. "Too many of his artists were junkies," Ed Sanders, of the Fugs, told a music critic, "and I think it's possible he used their addiction as a way of controlling them." Grossman's response to the heroin addiction of his client Janis Joplin was to take out a life-insurance policy on her.

In the early nineteen-seventies, the notoriety of rock managers was starting to rival that of their clients. Don DeLillo's novel "Great Jones Street" (1973), about the "devouring neon" of fame, gives us the rock star Bucky Wunderlick, who, burned out at twenty-five, holes up in a cold New York apartment, awaiting cosmic lessons about power and language. After stepping out for food one day, he returns to find his manager with one arm down the toilet bowl looking for a dime. Bucky's manager is a stand-in for many famous managers, putting his client at ease about broken commitments, "revenues, monies, so forth—grosses and the like." Before Bucky gains the attention of a

terrorist group, we get to admire the bold imperatives of his manager, a man "propelled, ballistically, to and from distant points of commerce."

The type is captured quite hilariously in the character of Dennis Hope, played by Jimmy Fallon in Cameron Crowe's "Almost Famous" (2000), also set in the early seventies. Hope is angling to manage the band Stillwater, and he arrives wearing a brown leather jacket and a brazenly spread collar, preening beneath the kind of glasses that helped Elvis conquer Las Vegas. "I didn't invent the rainy day," Hope says, with relish. "I just own the best umbrella." The rock manager had by then become his own tribute act, and in the overblown manner of the day Hope goes on to impress on his neophyte charges the Wagnerian seriousness of their world-conquering quest. "Welcome to New York," he says. "It's O.K. to be nervous. You should be nervous. All you can do is be yourself and leave a pint of blood on that stage." The consensus was that the manager had become the bullshit king of the turning world, a belief that hasn't quite gone away. ("He's a piece of shit," an industry source told Business Insider, commenting on Scooter Braun's relationship to his clients. "But he's my piece of shit.")

Peter Grant, who started out in the late nineteen-fifties as a bouncer at a London rock-and-roll coffee bar, was, by the mid-seventies, a cosmic beacon of death-defying behavior as well as the chief exemplar of the criminal-adjacent management style. He once wrapped Little Richard in a bedsheet and carried him to a waiting vehicle when he refused to do a gig. A whole bygone era is encapsulated in the fact that Grant, who became best known as Led Zeppelin's manager, once tried to drive a car into a swimming pool but got it wedged between two palm trees. (Bands today are kind to trees, and some have been known to mount concerts in aid of them.) At Seattle's Edgewater Hotel, Grant encountered a hotel manager who confessed to envying the rock guests who could vent their frustrations by trashing their rooms. Grant took the gentleman to his own suite and, as he recalled, told him to do his worst. "Here you are, have this room on Led Zeppelin," Grant said. "And he went 'Oh, yes!' and enjoyed himself, and it cost me $670." He claimed that, in the company of Don Arden (Sharon Osbourne's father and the onetime manager of the Small Faces), he dangled Robert Stigwood, a rival manager, from the fourth-floor balcony of Stigwood's London office. "He had disgusting skinny ankles," Grant later recalled.

Dressed in silk scarves, rings, and a long beard, Grant, weighing in at three hundred pounds at his heaviest, was driven by fear and cocaine to do everything he could for the band. Before him, the usual split with bands and concert promoters was sixty-forty; after him, it was ninety-ten. "The artist always wears the white hat," Colonel Tom Parker had said, but with Grant the artist also wore white suits and white feathers, bleached with sanctity. "The power we had was incredible," Phil Carlo, the band's road manager, recalled. "At this point I discovered the only people who could jump red lights with a police escort were the president of the United States and Peter Grant."

A contrasting case is presented by Malcolm McLaren, the London-born agitator and propagandist, who not only messed with the capitalist yearnings of rock but installed the manager as its central artist. (It took Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex, Viv Albertine of the Slits, and a tranche of female punk artists to expose the conformity in McLaren's program of change.) Attending to a stable of Dickensian types, McLaren was part Fagin, part Uriah Heep, up from the streets to magnify your life and pick your pockets. In Paul Gorman's "The Life & Times of Malcolm McLaren" (Constable), an exultant recent biography, McLaren plays a catalytic role similar to the one Warhol played for the previous generation; the Sex Pistols emerge as McLaren's house band, embodying his situationist rant, his cultural riposte, and his big joke. McLaren turned making an exhibition of yourself into a *ruse de guerre*, and when *New Musical Express* finally went big on the Pistols it was McLaren the magazine interviewed, under a banner headline, "Meet the Col Tom Parker of The Blank Generation."

According to her brother, Madonna had a Sid Vicious poster and a naked light bulb hanging in her New York apartment when she started out. Her first manager, Camille Barbone, promised a weekly wage of a hundred dollars and got her bicycle repaired. It was different for girls, but, in the nineteen-eighties, toughness became central to the rules of engagement. "Madonna basically pushed me to my financial limit, my loyalty limits, my patience limits," Barbone recalled. "I knew she was using me. But what could I expect, really?" Madonna's biographer Lucy O'Brien tells us that Barbone knew she didn't have the juice to get her client to the next level. (Other biographers reported that Barbone was in love with Madonna.) It's true that managers—like agents, like husbands, and like wives—are often fired and that, when they are, the parties involved seldom agree about how to split the blame. Madonna wanted the eighties and nineties to be a testing ground for female power and erotic candor, and they were. But the manager couldn't keep up with the star's ambition. Barbone was so distressed by the experience that she left the industry altogether and temporarily took work in a nursing home. "I needed people to say, 'thank you,'" she later explained.

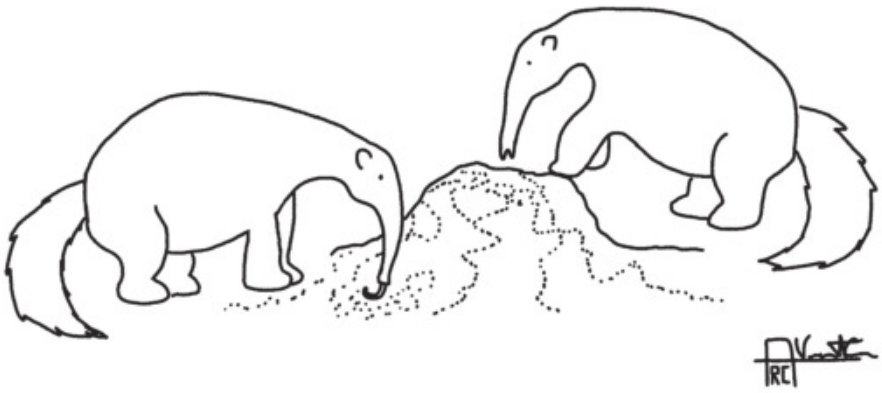
All artists have their own particular spiral of needs. Staci Robinson, in "Tupac Shakur: The Authorized Biography" (Crown), recounts that when execs at Time Warner, Tupac's record label's distributor, grew concerned about violent content (politicians had started to speechify about gangsta rap), the hip-hop star's manager, Atron Gregory, agreed with them that Tupac's next album "would have to be rethought." Atron's unease made Tupac uneasy about him, and he thereafter insisted that he become his manager's only client. "I need to be the most important to you," Tupac told him, testing not only Gregory's loyalty but his own requirements. "And if you don't want to do it this way, I gotta move on." His next manager came from the Black Panthers.

Managerial hysteria has evolved in all sorts of ways in the decades since

Brian Epstein first joined the girls to scream his head off. Kurt Cobain, of Nirvana, turned out to require a manager who would protect him not only from the industry but also from himself. Danny Goldberg, who looked after the band in the early nineties, recalls having a telephone conversation with the manager of Aerosmith to find out how you go about rescuing a rock star who's out of his mind on drugs. Cobain wanted to call Nirvana's third album "I Hate Myself and I Want to Die," like his anthemic song, and one of Goldberg's jobs was to talk him out of it while he still could. Goldberg was expected to double as a second father and the person in charge of critical interventions, which worked until it didn't. Cobain died by suicide in 1994.

Father fixations come up a lot in these highly fraught situations. The nineties boy-band impresario Lou Pearlman, known to his clients as Big Poppa, looked after many young men who yearned for a dependable father figure. 'N Sync had already toured for two years and sold millions of dollars in records when its five members received their first checks from him: ten thousand dollars each. A fellow-manager said Pearlman reminded her of "the kid who would tear the wings off of flies—not to kill them, just to watch them crawl around and not be able to fly." He had spent his bands' earnings promoting a huge Ponzi scheme, stealing hundreds of millions of dollars, the life savings of fourteen hundred people, and by 2008 his fiction had unravelled. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, where he died, in 2016, at the age of sixty-two. Still, his last days were spent dreaming of a comeback. All he needed was a phone and an Internet connection and he could start some new bands.

Management is increasingly portrayed as a creeping ailment in the omniverse of the singular rock artist. Not that anyone comes off well in HBO's "The Idol," a series about the music industry which was co-created by Sam Levinson and aired last year, about a young and beautiful star, Jocelyn (Lily-Rose Depp). She gets entangled with a sleazebag called Tedros (played by the Canadian singer-songwriter Abel Tesfaye, better known as the Weeknd), who advises her to ditch her professional team and let him take over her career.



"It's easy to control your portions when they won't stop moving."

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"The Idol" is consistent only in its depravity. With the plausibility of daytime soaps, the casual menace of Grand Theft Auto, the logic of revenge porn, and the momentum of a psychotic episode, the series takes the issue of control and turns it into a lethargic rock opera, with levels of confusion repurposed from the career of Britney Spears. That performer's struggle with professional and parental control is central to the memoir she published last October, "The Woman in Me" (Gallery Books), in which she questions the decision of her managers "to claim I was some kind of young-girl virgin even into my twenties." In Spears's time, managers operated variously as cult leaders or spin doctors, issuing editorials about their clients as opposed to repairing their bicycles. By the end of 2006, Britney had begun to fall into a period of mental illness, and she later endured a legal battle with her father to escape from his conservatorship. The singer writes that, at the height of her mismanagement, her father told her he was the boss. He was Britney now.

Scooter Braun has reportedly been losing many of his high-profile clients; Carly Rae Jepsen, Idina Menzel, Demi Lovato, BabyJake, and, most recently, Ariana Grande have moved on. He was never Taylor Swift's manager, but his troubled relationship with the superstar, a billionaire who in February became the only artist to win Album of the Year at the Grammys four times, may have a lasting impact on questions of authority in the music industry. In 2019, backed by the Carlyle Group, Braun bought Big Machine Label Group for three hundred million dollars, giving him ownership of the masters of Swift's first six albums. "Never in my worst nightmares did I imagine the buyer would be Scooter," she wrote on Tumblr. She has been re-recording those early songs, each one labelled "Taylor's Version."

Taylor Swift is effectively the C.E.O. of her own company. An article in *Forbes*, "What Taylor Swift Can Teach Us About Leadership," reveals that, when she gave the staff on her recent tour bonuses totalling fifty-five million dollars, she included five hundred notes she'd written herself. (It's hard to imagine Bob Dylan writing five hundred notes to his peeps, and even harder to imagine Albert Grossman or Colonel Parker signing off on bonuses to lighting operators and catering staff.) In the higher reaches of the industry, the backstage hustlers and hot messes are being supplanted by the executive power of the star herself, backed by a calming "manager" in a nice suit who helms a team of lawyers. "Everything has changed," as Swift sings. Douglas Baldridge, a Washington litigator and a former partner in a white-shoe law firm, is now the general counsel for 13 Management, which helps look after Swift in her efforts to look after herself. He is unlikely to be dangling anybody from a fourth-floor window by his ankles. The carnival barker and the charismatic goof, the superfan and the mad accountant—these types belong to a sunset tale of diminishing power. We'll probably miss them when they're gone. ♦

A LIFE MORE ORDINARY

A father is resurrected by his children in Amitava Kumar's "My Beloved Life."

BY JAMES WOOD

PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK DRISCOLL

For years I have been haunted by a sentence from V. S. Naipaul's great tragicomic novel "A House for Mr. Biswas" (1961): "In all, Mr Biswas lived for six years at The Chase, years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that they could be comprehended in one glance." A *sentence*, indeed: imagine handing down this summary verdict, and then imagine writing a novel whose every page rises up against the very summation. The verdict belongs to historical time: it tells us that Mr. Biswas's life, seen from above, is knowable only in its very unimportance, as an existence steadily disappearing into the careless comprehension of the cosmos. Historical time tells us that Mr. Biswas's life was not worth writing. Novelistic time is more forgiving. Naipaul's novel takes in Mohun Biswas's life episode by episode, telling it from inside his protagonist's comprehension, as a story of tremulous ambition and anxiety. How terrible it would have been, Mr. Biswas thinks, "to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."

Naipaul had good reason to accommodate Mohun Biswas in his full necessity, because he was essentially writing the life of his own father, Seepersad Naipaul. Unlike his brilliant son, who left Trinidad for Oxford and did not live at home again, Seepersad never left his birthplace. A multigenerational novel of father and son might bend all the way from the rural poverty of Seepersad's origins in the Caribbean to the sparkling Stockholm hall in which Vidia Naipaul received the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 2001.

I thought often of "A House for Mr. Biswas" while reading Amitava Kumar's new novel, "My Beloved Life" (Knopf). Kumar, who has written eloquently about his complicated indebtedness to the Indian Trinidadian writer, here tells the story of "an ordinary life": one that, in its Biswasian quietness, might not seem to claim the loud space of a novel. Jadu Kunwar, Kumar writes of his gentle hero, "had passed unnoticed through much of his life." His experiences "would not fill a book; they had been so light and inconsequential, like a brief ripple on a lake's surface." The realization that Kumar, like Naipaul, might also be writing a fictionalized version of his own late father's life breaks like a slowly cresting wave over the sad and joyful ground of this story.

"My Beloved Life" comprises two large sections and two smaller ones. The first tells the life of Jadunath Kunwar. Jadu, as he is known, is born in 1935 in a backwater of the state of Bihar, in eastern India, to illiterate farmers; moves to the nearby city of Patna for his education, and eventually becomes a lecturer in history at Patna College; marries a woman named Maya and has a daughter, Jugnu; and wins a Fulbright scholarship to study at Berkeley, in the late nineteen-eighties, before returning to India. He dies in 2020, in the first wave of the COVID pandemic. These, you might say, are the facts that can be comprehended in one glance, though the facts are precious and the life remarkable.

The novelist then tenderly sows the hundred and fifty or so pages with a trail of story and detail, and the remarkable life becomes also a beloved life, one compassionately appraised by the noticing novelist. And what noticing! Kumar—who himself grew up in Patna, came to America as a graduate student in the late nineteen-eighties, and now teaches at Vassar College—has never lacked for material. Patna, he tells us in "Bombay London New York" (2002), an early work of criticism and memoir, was a poor city. In the hospital where Kumar's sister

Kumar's small details have the vitality of invention and the resonance of the real.

would eventually work as a doctor, stray dogs pull at patients' bandages and flying ants settle in wounds: "Patna is a place where rats carried away my mother's dentures." When he moved, as a student, to Minnesota, Kumar had never seen an olive.

In the fiction that followed "Bombay London New York," Kumar sometimes demonstrated an uneasiness with letting stories and details speak for themselves, tending to expand and expatiate on them via essay, cultural criticism, long footnotes, and literary allusion—varieties of autofictional expression that teasingly came together in "Immigrant, Montana" (2018). That book's narrator, sharing Kumar's trajectory from Bihar to America, and even the author's initials (in the book, he sometimes goes by AK), writes this about his origins: "My father had grown up in a hut. I knew in my heart that I was closer to a family of peasants than I was to a couple of intellectuals sitting in a restaurant in New York." Moments like these pierce, from time to time, AK's comic narrative about American girlfriends, sex, new music, movies, President Obama, and reading Edward Said and Stuart Hall. Reading Kumar, one sometimes has a stronger sense of what he wanted to avoid than of what he was willing to embrace. Satya, the Kumar-like narrator of "A Time Outside This Time" (2021), appears to disdain what he calls the conventional, "eternal" bourgeois novel—which deals with "the human heart in conflict with itself et cetera."

It's not clear, by this rather narrow definition, whether "My Beloved Life" is exactly a bourgeois novel, since it is less about the human heart in conflict with itself than it is about the self in conflict (and sometimes in agreement) with society and history. Certainly, Kumar knows that his own biography, a novelized version of which appears in "My Beloved Life," concerns nothing less than the fabrication of a bourgeois self, however fragile or contradictory that achievement may occasionally feel to him. Above all, his new novel is always deeply human; the heart is everywhere in these pages. It is easily the best thing Amitava Kumar has written, largely because the novelist relaxes into the novelistic, and trusts the tale rather than the teller. Its astonishing details sit in the text like little coiled stories, pointedly revealed but not overpoweringly unpacked by the writer.

Cosmopolitans, Kumar wrote years ago, are not only those people who move between countries or continents but also those who move great distances, geographic or social, within their native countries. Such is Jadu. When he arrives at college in Patna, he has two shirts, one blue and one white. He spends his first night in the city sleeping on the riverbank. His greatest desire, Kumar writes, is to tell his fellow-students about the poverty of his origins. He might tell them, for instance, that he was born in the village of Khewali, where his father and grandfather were also born. That his parents are peasants. That his village school had only one teacher, who was absent whenever he was needed to help with the harvest, and that this teacher was also a wrestler, earning extra rupees from matches in nearby villages. Often, after these fights, the teacher would "ask two of his strongest students to massage his limbs. When this happened, the other students were asked to loudly recite the multiplication tables."

Not that all the students in Patna are wealthier or more privileged than Jadu. Ramdeo Manjhi, for instance, is a Dalit, a so-called untouchable. Ramdeo tells Jadu that his people "did the jobs that the upper-caste people didn't do—dragging away the carcasses of dead animals, for instance." Throughout the book, Kumar keeps his eye on questions of class and social stratification. Ramdeo grows up to be a corrupt local politician.

Kumar's details have the vitality of invention and the resonance of the real, as if echoing with actual family history. When Jadu returns from college in Patna to his parents' village, he brings gifts. He gives his father a heavy bronze lock, intended for a trunk of precious family papers. So proud is Jadu's father that he goes about all day with this lock in his hand, "key attached," ready to answer any questions about the gleaming new acquisition: "The brand name Harrison was etched in the metal. In reality, the lock company owed its name to an entrepreneur named Hari Monga." Jadu's father doesn't know this. "English-make," he tells any inquisitor. "See the name."

Gentle comedy like this can turn to tears within a page or two. The scene with the lock is followed by a moving episode in which Jadu and his sister Lata, in order to improve her English, work together to translate a poem from Jadu's college textbook into Hindi. It is Edward Thomas's "Adlestrop," a brief lyric published in 1917 which offers a glimpse of pastoral England. In late June, a train stops at a rural station in Gloucestershire. Mild English summer is everywhere. The train hisses, someone coughs, a blackbird sings. All around are willows, willow herb, and meadowsweet. Lata remarks that she has seen such stations in India, desolate rural platforms. But how to translate the word "Adlestrop," or the names of these very English flora and fauna? Eventually, they have a poem, less a translation than a reinvention, in which a train stops at a station called Sugauli, to take on water. The passengers want the train to stay there, because a mynah is singing in the branches of a mahua tree. When Jadu tells Lata that Edward Thomas died in the First World War, before the poem was published, her eyes glisten, but he doesn't want to ask what has moved her so much. "Instead, he congratulated his sister for her poem, and she, finding herself praised by her brother, the college student, spoke to him in English," Kumar writes. " 'Thank you,' she said, before rushing out of the room."

It is a touching and freighted moment. The English poem, not unlike the returning Jadu in relation to his less educated sister, is the bearer of cultural prestige. The translation into Hindi inevitably fails; instead, two fabulously different, almost rivalrous texts sit next to each other. I'm reminded of a moment in Amit Chaudhuri's novel "Odysseus Abroad" when the protagonist, an Indian student adapting to life in London, pauses to reflect on Shakespeare's line "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The poem had been senseless at home: who would want to be compared to a summer's day in Bombay? Only now, in London, does the simile make sense, but the Indian student had to be himself translated in order to grasp it. In "Immigrant, Montana," Kumar's narrator reads a story by Ismat Chughtai in English, and cannot turn it back into its original Urdu. He feels sad and stranded, far from home in America: "I had become a translated man, no longer able to connect with my own past." But what is notable in the scene from "A Beloved

Life" is that Kumar resists this kind of commentary. He does not spell out the source of Lata's tears, instead closing with her rushed departure from the room, her English "thank you" a pained and proper response to the perhaps rare excitement of being "praised by her brother." All the emotion finds its locus in that beautiful human phrase. It is a novelist's scene, an episode that would have been spoiled by a superadded term like "translated man."

From time to time, Jadu attempts to write the remarkable-unremarkable story of his life. A memoir is completed but is never published. He is too much the professional historian. The uncertainty of memoir disturbs him; he is drawn to collective history over personal drama. His daughter says that he has a tendency to speak as if reciting text from a Wikipedia entry, that he's the sort of person who would rather write about the manufacture of jute than about his own child. When Jadu arrives at Berkeley, in 1988, he is lonely, and cuts a formal figure. When asked what he is researching in California, he stiffly replies, "I'm studying a chapter in history." So, as in "A House for Mr. Biswas," the question of how Jadu's private life is recounted, and by whom, will be humanly and politically important. And, as in "Biswas," the novel's recounting of the life is also the novel's continuous justification of its own existence as a form. This, Kumar signals, is what novels *do*. There is "the chapter in history" that comprises the biographical arc of Jadu's life. And then there are all the private undulations within that chapter in history. For the novelist can then comment, as he now does, using the novelist's privileged insight, "A chapter in history! The language of application forms. Clichés in the dull getup of office clerks. Jadu would have felt a greater sense of ease if he was expressing himself in Hindi. . . . At Berkeley, he now spoke only English; it felt as if he was doing something new or strange, like wearing a hat."

In fact, Jadu's life is told twice over in this novel—the first large section recounts it in the third person, and then the second large section recounts it in the first-person voice of Jadu's daughter, Jugnu, bringing us to the present day. Jugnu tells us, too, about her own ordinary yet also remarkable existence: she attended Patna Women's College, got her master's degree in journalism in Delhi, and has been living for more than twenty years in Atlanta, where she works for CNN. We discover that her mother, Maya, died young, at the age of fifty-two, and that her father's year in Berkeley is what inspired Jugnu to leave for America. She retells some of the episodes that the first section has already presented, with a daughter's simultaneously forgiving and judgmental eye. As a journalist, she speaks plainly and boldly: "I believe strongly that we are in touch with a great astonishing mystery when we put honest words down on paper to register a life and to offer witness." She tells us about an episode from not long after her father's return from Berkeley. Jugnu, then working at a Delhi newspaper, accompanies Jadu to a local club, where he is to speak to a group of intellectuals about his Fulbright year. Instead of giving the audience what it wants (tales about peanut butter), Jadu speaks about caste inequalities, racial prejudice against Indians in the United States, episodes of anti-Indian violence by Americans, and so on. Jugnu wonders if others in the room see her father as she does. In his watchful anxiety, he simply cannot play the happy returning sightseer, the grateful Indian visitor: "He wasn't a tourist or even a traveler at the airport; he was like a patient in the waiting room outside a doctor's clinic," someone who is nursing a sickness and knows that others are sick, too. "The poverty of his childhood defined him utterly," she concludes.

At the club, Jadu told his audience, "I was born in a hut and my village still doesn't have electricity." The phrase "born in a hut," or some version of it, appears often enough in the novel (at least five times) for the reader to register its talismanic importance. Recall those sentences from "Immigrant, Montana": "My father had grown up in a hut. I knew in my heart that I was closer to a family of peasants than I was to a couple of intellectuals sitting in a restaurant in New York." Kumar's felt proximity to his own family origins in poverty has always given his work a tender, corrective power. Indeed, what is it like to be "a translated man"? What is it like when such translation plays on an axis of economic as well as geographic relocation? In Kumar's work, the question invariably gets caught up in feelings of guilt: the guilt an emigrating child has about leaving his parents behind and so far away, about having had greater opportunities and greater ease than they did, about never returning for good and rarely returning for long. Jugnu's section is dominated by an American daughter's grief, and her guilt: she cannot forgive herself for the fact that her father died alone and far away from her, that in his last hours he phoned her in America and left a message, that she did not immediately pick up. By the time she listened to the message, her father had died. Her account, like the entirety of Kumar's novel, commits itself to a kind of narrative recompense: "I'm trying to understand how to mark the life of my father who died alone." Jadu's cousin voices Jugnu's own guilt when they speak on the phone about her recently deceased father: "This is the problem with all of you who go so far away," he chides her.

In a recent LitHub piece, Kumar wrote that his mother died in 2014, and that his father died last year, and not in 2020, as Jadu, the fictional father, does. Kumar was able to reach his father's bedside before he died, but not quickly enough to find his father still conscious. Kumar's essay tells us what actually happened but dissipates some of its personal force amid references to Naipaul, Annie Ernaux, Martin Amis, Sharon Olds, and Nick Laird, all writers who have in powerful ways described their dying fathers. Kumar's novel has far greater autobiographical power than his nonfiction essay does. His beautiful, truthful fiction rings with all the gratitude and anticipated grief that he expressed in 2002, in "Bombay London New York," when both of his parents were still alive. It is not the immigrants, he wrote then, but the ones who stay behind who are truly heroic: "Each year, I travel to the town in India where my parents live. I am able to spend only a few days with them. And then I return to America." Kumar says he wants to believe that his parents, "old and set in their ways, anxious, and forever bickering, find in each other the strength that their children do not provide." This novel finds and provides great strength—too late for Kumar's parents, but in good time for his grateful readers. ♦

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED

Exploring the fateful expeditions of Captain Cook.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

Cook was a brilliant navigator. What horrors did he leave in his wake?

On Valentine's Day, 1779, Captain James Cook invited Hawaii's King Kalani'ōpu'u to visit his ship, the Resolution. Cook and the King were on friendly terms, but, on this particular day, Cook planned to take Kalani'ōpu'u hostage. Some of the King's subjects had stolen a small boat from Cook's fleet, and the captain intended to hold Kalani'ōpu'u until it was returned. The plan quickly went awry, however, and Cook ended up face down in a tidal pool.

At the time of his death, Cook was Britain's most celebrated explorer. In the course of three epic voyages—the last one, admittedly, unfinished—he had mapped the east coast of Australia, circumnavigated New Zealand, made the first documented crossing of the Antarctic Circle, "discovered" the Hawaiian Islands, paid the first known visit to South Georgia Island, and attached names to places as varied as New Caledonia and Bristol Bay. Wherever Cook went, he claimed land for the Crown. When King George III learned of Cook's demise, he reportedly wept. An obituary that ran in the London *Gazette* mourned an "irreparable Loss to the Public." A popular poet named Anna Seward published an elegy in which the Muses, apprised of Cook's passing, shed "drops of Pity's holy dew." (The work sold briskly and was often reprinted without the poet's permission.)

"While on each wind of heav'n his fame shall rise, / In endless incense to the smiling skies," Seward wrote. Artists competed to depict Cook's final moments; in their paintings and engravings, they, too, tended to represent the captain Heaven-bound. An account of Cook's life which ran in a London magazine declared that he had "discovered more countries in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans than all the other navigators together." The anonymous author of this account opined that, among mariners, none would be "more entitled to the admiration and gratitude of posterity."

Posterity, of course, has a mind of its own. In 2019, the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Cook's landing in New Zealand, a replica of the ship he'd sailed made an official tour around the country. According to New Zealand's government, the tour was intended as an opportunity to reflect on the nation's complex history. Some Māori groups banned the boat from their docks, on the ground that they'd already reflected enough.

Cook "was a barbarian," the then chief executive of the Ngāti Kahu *iwi* told a reporter. Two years ago, an obelisk erected in 1874 to mark the spot where Cook was killed, on Kealakekua Bay, was vandalized. "You are on native land," someone painted on the monument. In January, on the eve of Australia Day, an antipodean version of the Fourth of July, a bronze statue of Cook that had stood in Melbourne for more than a century was sawed off at the ankles. When a member of the community council proposed that area residents be consulted on whether to restore the statue, a furor erupted. At a meeting delayed by protest, the council narrowly voted against consultation and in favor of repair. A council member on the losing side expressed shock at the way the debate had played out, saying it had devolved into an "absolutely crazy mess."

Into these roiling waters wades "The Wide Wide Sea: Imperial Ambition, First Contact and the Fateful Final Voyage of Captain James Cook" (Doubleday), a new biography by Hampton Sides. Sides, a journalist whose previous books include the best-selling "Ghost Soldiers," about a 1945 mission to rescue Allied prisoners of war, acknowledges the hazards of the enterprise. "Eurocentrism, patriarchy, entitlement, toxic masculinity," and "cultural appropriation" are, he writes, just a few of the charged issues raised by Cook's legacy. It's precisely the risks, Sides adds, that drew him to the subject.

Cook, the second of eight children, was born in 1728 in Yorkshire. His father was a farm laborer, and Cook would likely have followed the same path had he not shown early promise in school. His parents apprenticed him

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE BENBASSAT

to a merchant, but Cook was bored by dry goods. In 1747, he joined the crew of the Freelove, a boat that, despite its name, was designed for the distinctly unerotic task of ferrying coal to London.

After working his way up in the Merchant Navy, Cook jumped ship, as it were. At the age of twenty-six, he enlisted in the Royal Navy, and one of his commanders, recognizing Cook's talents, encouraged him to take up surveying. A chart that Cook helped draft of the St. Lawrence River proved crucial to the British victory in the French and Indian War.

In 1768, Cook was given command of his own ship, H.M.S. Endeavour, a boxy, square-sterned boat that, like the Freelove, had been built for hauling coal. The Navy was sending the Endeavour to the South Pacific, ostensibly for scientific purposes. A transit of Venus was approaching, and it was believed that careful observation of the event could be used to determine the distance between the Earth and the sun. Cook and his men were supposed to watch the transit from Tahiti, which the British had recently claimed. Then, and only then, was the captain to open a set of sealed orders from the Admiralty which would provide further instructions.

The Endeavour departed from Plymouth, made its way to Rio, and from there sailed around the tip of South America. Arriving in Tahiti, where British and French sailors had already infected many of the women with syphilis, Cook drew up rules to govern his crew's dealings with the island's inhabitants. The men were not to trade items from the boat "in exchange for any thing but provisions." (That rule appears to have been flagrantly flouted.)

The day of the transit—June 3, 1769—dawned clear, or, as Cook put it, "as favourable to our purposes as we could wish." But the observers' measurements differed so much that it was evident—or should have been—that something had gone wrong. (The whole plan, it later became clear, was fundamentally flawed.) Whether Cook had indeed waited until this point to open his secret instructions is unknown; in any event, they pointed to the true purpose of the trip. From Tahiti, the Endeavour was to seek out a great continent—Terra Australis Incognita—theorized to lie somewhere to the south. If Cook located this continent, he was to track its coast, and "with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain." If he didn't locate it, he was to head to New Zealand, which the British knew of only vaguely, from the Dutch.

The Endeavour spent several weeks searching for the continent. Nothing much happened during this period except that a crew member drank himself to death. As per the Admiralty's instructions, Cook next headed west. The ship landed on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island on October 8, 1769. Within the first day, Cook's men had killed at least four Māori and wounded several others.

A ship like the Endeavour was its own floating world, its commander an absolute ruler. A Royal Navy captain was described as a "King at Sea" and could mete out punishment—typically flogging—as he saw fit. At the same time, in the vastness of the ocean, a ship's captain had no one to turn to for help. He had to be ever mindful that he was outnumbered.

Cook was known as a stickler for order. A crew member recorded that Cook once performed an inspection of his men's hands; those with dirty fingers forfeited the day's allowance of grog. He seemed to have a sixth sense for the approach of land; another crew member claimed that Cook could intuit it even in the dead of night. Although in the seventeen-seventies no one knew what caused scurvy, Cook insisted that his men eat fresh fruit whenever possible and that they consume sauerkraut, a good source of Vitamin C.

Of Cook's inner life, few traces remain. When he set off for Tahiti, he had a wife and three children. Before she died, Elizabeth Cook burned her personal papers, including her correspondence with her husband. Letters from Cook that have been preserved mostly read like this one, to the Navy Board: "Please to order his Majesty's Bark the Endeavour to be supply'd with eight Tonns of Iron Ballast." Cook left behind voluminous logs and journals; the entries in these, too, are generally bloodless.

"Punished Richard Hutchins, seaman, with 12 lashes for disobeying commands," he wrote, on April 16, 1769, when the Endeavour was anchored off Tahiti. "Most part of these 24 hours Cloudy, with frequent Showers of Rain,"

he observed, from the same spot, on May 25th. The captain, as one of his biographers has put it, had "no natural gift for rhapsody." Sides writes, "It could be said that he lived during a romantic age of exploration, but he was decidedly *not* a romantic."

Still, feelings and opinions do sometimes creep into Cook's writing. He is by turns charmed and appalled by the novel customs he encounters. A group of Tahitians cook a dog for him; he finds it very tasty and resolves "for the future never to dispise Dog's flesh." He sees some islanders eat the lice that they have picked out of their hair and declares this highly "disagreeable."

Many of the Indigenous people Cook met had never before seen a European. Cook recognized it was in his interest to convince them that he came in friendship; he also saw that, in case persuasion failed, the main advantage he possessed was guns.

In a journal entry devoted to the Endeavour's first landing in New Zealand, near present-day Gisborne, Cook treats the killing of the Māori as regrettable but justified. The British had attempted to take some Māori men on board their ship to demonstrate that their intentions were peaceful. But this gesture was—understandably—misinterpreted. The Māori hurled their canoe paddles at the British, who responded by firing at them. Cook acknowledges "that most Humane men" will condemn the killings. But, he declares, "I was not to stand still and suffer either myself or those that were with me to be knocked on the head."

After mapping both New Zealand's North and South Islands, Cook headed to Australia, then known as New Holland. The Endeavour worked its way to the country's northernmost point, which Cook named York Cape (and which is now called Cape York). The inhabitants of the coast made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with the British. Cook left gifts onshore, but they remained untouched.

Cook's response to the Aboriginal Australians is one of the most often cited passages from his journals. In it, he seems to foresee—and regret—the destruction of Indigenous cultures which his own expeditions will facilitate. "From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched People upon Earth; but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans," he writes.

> The earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life. They covet not Magnificient Houses, Household-stuff, etc.; they live in a Warm and fine Climate, and enjoy every wholesome Air. . . . They seem'd to set no Value upon anything we gave them, nor would they ever part with anything of their own for any one Article we could offer them. This, in my opinion, Argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessarys of Life, and that they have no Superfluities.

If Cook's first voyage failed to turn up the missing continent or to calculate the Earth's distance from the sun, imperially speaking it was a resounding success: the captain had claimed both New Zealand and the east coast of Australia for Britain. (In neither case had Cook sought or secured the "Consent of the Natives," but this lapse doesn't seem to have troubled the Admiralty.) The very next year, Cook was dispatched again, this time in command of two ships, the Resolution and the Adventure. Navy brass continued to insist that Terra Australis Incognita was out there somewhere—presumably farther south than the Endeavour had ventured—and on his second voyage Cook was supposed to keep sailing until he found it. He crossed and recrossed the Antarctic Circle, at one point getting as far as seventy-one degrees south. Conditions on the Southern Ocean were generally terrible—frigid and foggy. Still, there was no sign of a continent. Cook ventured that if there were any land nearer to the pole it would be so hemmed in by ice that it would "never be explored." (Antarctica would not be sighted for almost fifty years.)

Once more, Cook hadn't found what he was seeking, but upon his return he was again hailed as a hero. Britain's leading scientific institution, the Royal Society, granted him its highest honor, the Copley Medal, and the Navy rewarded him with a cushy desk job. The expectation was that he would settle down, enjoy his sinecure, and finally spend some time with his family. Instead, he set out on yet another expedition.

"The Wide Wide Sea" focusses almost exclusively on Cook's third—and for him fatal—voyage. Sides portrays Cook's decision to undertake it as an act of hubris; the captain, he writes, "could scarcely imagine failure." The journey got off to an inauspicious start. Cook's second-in-command, Charles Clerke, was to captain a ship called the Discovery, while Cook, once again, sailed on the Resolution. When both vessels were scheduled to depart, in July, 1776, Clerke was nowhere to be found. (Thanks to the improvidence of a brother, he'd been tossed in debtors' prison.) Cook set off without him. A few weeks later, the Resolution nearly crashed into one of the Cape Verde Islands, a mishap that Sides sees as a portent. The ship, it turned out, also leaked terribly—another bad sign.

The plan for the third voyage was more or less the inverse of the second's. Cook's instructions were to head north and to look not for land but for its absence. The Admiralty wanted him to find a seaway around Canada—the fabled Northwest Passage. Generations of sailors had sought the passage from the Atlantic and been blocked by ice. Cook was to probe from the opposite direction.

The expedition also had a secondary aim involving a Polynesian named Mai. Mai came from the Society Islands, and in 1773 he had talked his way on board the Adventure. Arriving in London the following year, he entranced the British aristocracy. He sat in on sessions of Parliament, learned to hunt grouse, met the King, and, according to Sides, became "something of a card sharp." But, after two years of entertaining toffs, Mai wanted to go home. It fell to Cook to take him, along with a barnyard's worth of livestock that King George III was sending as a gift.

Clerke, on the Discovery, finally caught up to Cook in Cape Town, where the Resolution was docked for provisioning and repairs. Together, the two ships sailed away from Africa and stopped off in Tasmania. In February, 1777, they pulled into Queen Charlotte Sound, a long, narrow inlet

in the northeast corner of New Zealand's South Island. There, more trouble awaited.

Cook had visited Queen Charlotte Sound (which he had named) four times before. During his second voyage, it had been the site of a singularly gruesome disaster. Ten of Cook's men—sailors on the Adventure—had gone ashore to gather provisions. The Māori had slain and, it was said, eaten them.

Cook wasn't in New Zealand when the slaughter took place; the Adventure and the Resolution had been separated in a fog. But, on his way back to England, he heard rumblings about it from the crew of a Dutch vessel that the Resolution encountered at sea. Cook was reluctant to credit the rumors. He wrote that he would withhold judgment on the "Melancholy affair" until he had learned more. "I must however observe in favour of the New Zealanders that I have allways found them of a Brave, Noble, Open and benevolent disposition," he added.

By the time of the third voyage, Cook knew the stories he'd heard were, broadly speaking, accurate. Why, then, did he return to the scene of the carnage? Sides argues that Cook was still searching for answers. The captain, he writes, thought the massacre "demanded an inquiry and a reckoning, however long overdue."

In his investigation, Cook was aided by Mai, whose native language was similar to Māori. The sequence of events that Mai helped piece together began with the theft of some bread. The leader of the British crew had reacted to this petty crime by shooting not only the thief but also a second Māori man. In retaliation, the Māori had killed all ten British sailors and chopped up their bodies. Eventually, Cook learned who had led the retaliatory raid—a pugnacious local chief named Kahura. One day, Mai pointed him out to Cook. The following day, the captain invited Kahura on board the Resolution and ushered him down into his private cabin. Instead of shooting Kahura, Cook had his draftsman draw a portrait of him.

Mai found Cook's conduct unfathomable. "Why do you not kill him?" he cried. Cook's men, too, were infuriated. They made fun of his forbearance by staging a mock trial. One of the sailors had adopted a Polynesian dog known as a kurī. (The breed is now extinct.) The men accused the dog of cannibalism, found it guilty as charged, then killed and ate it.

Sides doesn't think that Cook knew about the cannibal burlesque, but the captain, he says, sensed his crew's disaffection. And this, Sides argues, caused something in Cook to snap. For Cook, he writes, the "visit to Queen Charlotte Sound became a sharp turning point." It would be the last time that the captain would be accused of leniency.

As evidence of Cook's changed outlook, Sides relates an incident that occurred eight months after the trial of the dog, this one featuring a pregnant goat. The Resolution had anchored off Moorea, one of the Society Islands, and animals from the ship's travelling menagerie had been left to graze onshore. One day, a goat went missing. Cook was told that the animal had been taken to a village on the opposite end of the island. With three dozen men, he marched to the village and torched it. (Most of the villagers had fled before he arrived.) The next day, the goat still had not been returned, and the British continued their rampage. Such was the level of destruction, one of Cook's men noted in his journal, that it "could scarcely be repaired in a century." Another crew member expressed shock at the captain's "precipitate proceeding," which, he said, violated "any principle one can form of justice."

Having wrecked much of Moorea, Cook couldn't leave Mai there, so he installed him and his livestock on the nearby island of Huahine. A few years later, Mai died, apparently from a virus introduced by yet another boatload of European sailors.

Cook spent several months searching fruitlessly along the coast of Alaska for the Northwest Passage. But, on the journey north from Huahine, he had stumbled upon something arguably better—the Hawaiian Islands. In January, 1778, the Resolution and the Discovery stopped in Kauai. The following January, they landed at Kealakekua Bay, on the Big Island.

What the Hawaiians thought of the strange men who appeared on strange ships has been much debated in academic circles. (Two prominent anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins, of the University of Chicago, and Gananath Obeyesekere, of Princeton, engaged in a high-profile feud on the subject which spanned decades.) Cook and his men happened to have landed on the Big Island at the height of an important festival. The captain was greeted by thousands of people invoking Lono, a god associated with peace and fertility. According to some scholars, the Hawaiians gathered for the festival saw Cook as the embodiment of Lono. According to others, they saw him as someone playacting Lono, and, according to still others, the whole Cook-as-Lono story is a myth created by Europeans. What Cook himself thought is unknown, because no logs or journal entries from the last few weeks of his life survive. It is possible that he just let his record-keeping slide, and it is also possible that the entries contained compromising information and were destroyed by the Admiralty.

After Cook had been on the Big Island for several days, King Kalani'ōpu'u appeared with a fleet of war canoes. (He had, it seems, been off fighting on another island.) At first, Kalani'ōpu'u welcomed the British—he presented Cook with a magnificent cloak made of feathers, and he dined several times on the Resolution—then he indicated that it was time for them to go. It's unclear whether the King's impatience reflected the religious calendar—the festival associated with Lono had concluded—or more mundane concerns, such as feeding so many hungry sailors, but Cook got the message. The expedition soon departed, only to suffer another mishap. The foremast of the Resolution snapped. There was no way for it to go forward, so both ships made their way back to Kealakekua Bay.

It was while the British were trying to repair the Resolution that someone made off with the small boat and Cook decided to take the King hostage. The captain had often resorted to this tactic to get—or get back—what he wanted; it had usually worked well for him, but never before had he dealt with someone as powerful as Kalani'ōpu'u. Cook was leading the King down to the beach—Kalani'ōpu'u seems to have been convinced he was being invited for another friendly meal—when war-

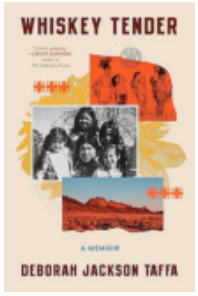
riors started to emerge from the trees. Sides argues that Cook could have saved himself had he simply turned and run, but, as one of his men put it, "he too wrongly thought that the flash of a musket would disperse the whole island." In the fighting that ensued, Cook, four of his men, and as many as thirty Hawaiians were killed. As was customary on the island, Cook's body was burned. Some of his singed bones were returned to the British; those that remained in Hawaii, according to Sides, were later paraded around as part of the festival associated with Lono.

Though Sides says he wants to "reckon anew" with Cook, it's not exactly clear what this would entail at a time when the captain has already been—figuratively, at least—sawed off at the ankles. "The Wide Wide Sea" portrays Cook as a complicated figure, driven by instincts and motives that often seem to have been opaque even to him. Although it's no hagiography, the book is also not likely to rattle teacups at the Captain Cook Society, members of which receive a quarterly publication devoted entirely to Cook-related topics.

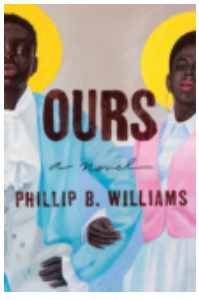
Like all biographies, "The Wide Wide Sea" emphasizes agency. Cook may be an ambivalent, even self-contradictory figure; still, it's his actions and decisions that drive the narrative forward. But, as Cook himself seemed to have realized, and on occasion lamented, he was but an instrument in a much, much larger scheme. The whole reason the British sent him off to seek Terra Australis Incognita was that they feared a rival power would reach it first. If Cook hadn't hoisted what he called the "English Colours" on what's still known as Possession Island, in northern Queensland, it seems fair to assume that another captain would have claimed Australia for England or for some other European nation. Similarly, if Cook's men hadn't brought sexually transmitted diseases to the Hawaiian Islands, then sailors from a different ship would have done so. Colonialism and its attendant ills were destined to reach the many paradisaical places Cook visited and mapped, although, without his undeniable navigational skills, that might have taken a few years more. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

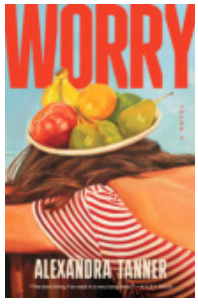
Out of the Darkness, *by Frank Trentmann (Knopf)*. Germany's postwar transformation into Europe's political conscience is often cast as a triumphant story of moral rehabilitation. This book points to the limitations of that narrative, arguing that, in the past eight decades, German society has been "preoccupied with rebuilding the country and coming to terms with the Nazi past" rather than with confronting its obligations to the broader world. Trentmann draws from a wide range of sources, including amateur plays and essays by schoolchildren. These lend intimacy to his portrait of a citizenry engaged in the continuous process of formulating its own views of right and wrong as it debates issues from rearmament to environmentalism.



Whiskey Tender, *by Deborah Jackson Taffa (Harper)*. This vibrant memoir recalls the author's childhood on the traditional lands of the Quechan (Yuma) people on a reservation in California, and in a Navajo Nation border town in New Mexico. The move to New Mexico, in 1976, reflected Taffa's parents' desire for their children to "be mainstream Americans." As a young woman, however, Taffa sought to link her identity to figures from her ancestral past, such as a great-grandmother who lectured and performed for white society. In her account, Taffa regards the broad tapestry of history and picks at its smallest threads: individual choices shaped by violent social forces, and by the sometimes erratic powers of love.



Ours, *by Phillip B. Williams (Viking)*. In this ambitious début novel, a Harriet Tubman figure possessed of supernatural abilities founds a town in Missouri, whose first inhabitants she has rescued from slavery. Magically concealed from the outside world, the community is ostensibly a haven, yet the weight of its inhabitants' pasts and the confines of safety prove to be difficult burdens. In lush, ornamental prose, Williams, who is also a poet, traces many characters' entwined journeys as they seek to understand the forces that assemble and separate them. The novel is an inventive ode to self-determination and also a surrealistic vision of Black life as forged within the crucible of American history.



Worry, *by Alexandra Tanner (Scribner)*. This dryly witty novel centers on Jules, a twenty-eight-year-old aspiring novelist turned study-guide editor living in Brooklyn, and her younger sister, who has just moved in with her. Jules swings between irritation and compassion toward her sibling; she notes that "having a sister is looking in a cheap mirror: what's there is you, but unfamiliar and ugly for it." Jules is just self-aware enough to admit that chief among her joys in life is feeling superior to others. She spins a fixation on her Instagram feed as research for "a book-length hybrid essay" on feminism, capitalism, antisemitism, and the Internet. As Tanner's novel explores these topics, its depiction of Jules's relationships also highlights absurdities of contemporary culture and the consequences of self-absorption.

POP MUSIC

HOPE

Vampire Weekend doesn't want your defeatist grousing.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

One of the band's motifs is a persistent curiosity about faith and the divine.

For a while, in the late two-thousands, it was extremely fun to dunk on Vampire Weekend. Formed at Columbia University in 2006, the band made perky, bleating indie rock about Cape Cod, mansard roofs, and Oxford commas. The singer and guitarist Ezra Koenig wore khakis and sometimes loosely knotted a sweater around his shoulders, a look that everyone knows is the unofficial uniform of rich, scummy boyfriends in high-school movies. The band's vibe was preppy but lightly debauched, somewhere between "Dead Poets Society" and "Less Than Zero." Vampire Weekend felt slightly out of step with the arch, fuzzy, forward-thinking indie rock of the time. Its music was polished and sunny, a little cocky, with melodic sensibilities indebted to the dynamic, sensitive songs and songwriters of the seventies and eighties: the Beat's "Save It for Later," Paul Simon's "Under African Skies," Harry Nilsson's "Gotta Get Up."

The band's second album, "Contra," released in 2010, débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200. The songs were idiosyncratic but had shockingly broad appeal. That winter, the single "Holiday," a reggae-inflected rock track that, for better or worse, could have been airlifted from a third-wave ska compilation, appeared in two major television commercials at the same time. More albums followed—"Modern Vampires of the City," in 2013, and "Father of the Bride," in 2019.

Koenig's voice is high, clear, and mannered, but there's something unusually intimate about his phrasing and delivery. It always sounds, to me, as if he's both close and far away, maybe on the other end of a phone, shouting across some vast distance. He has a few recurring lyrical motifs, one of which is a vague religiosity—a deep and persistent curiosity about faith and the divine. In this way, Koenig most resembles Simon, whose music—including its deft (if ballsy) adoption of polyrhythms from sub-Saharan Africa—has always been a major touchstone for the band. Like Simon, Koenig grew up around New York City and was raised Jewish. On "Unbelievers," a song from "Modern Vampires of the City," Koenig wonders about salvation, forgiveness, baptism: "But what holy water contains a little drop, little drop for me?" That question—could he willingly submit to a sublime force, be it God's love, romantic love, or anything that requires untold devotion?—comes up again and again in Vampire Weekend's discography. On "Everlasting Arms," Koenig asks, "Could I be made to serve a master? / Well, I'm never gonna understand, never understand." Another of Koenig's lyrical preoccupations—surely not unrelated—is the unstoppable trudge of time. (Koenig co-hosts an online radio show titled "Time Crisis.") On "Step," also from "Modern Vampires," he worries about man's inevitable trajectory: "Wisdom's a gift, but you'd trade it for youth." What if at the end of all this there is simply more unknowing? "Age is an honor, it's still not the truth," Koenig adds.

This month, Vampire Weekend will release "Only God Was Above Us," its fifth album. The band's current lineup includes Koenig, the drummer Chris Tomson, and the bassist Chris Baio. (In 2016, the visionary multi-instrumentalist and producer Rostam Batmanglij announced that he had left the group, on amicable terms; he is credited as a co-writer and a co-producer on "The Surfer," a gorgeous, spacey new song.) Vampire Weekend has never made a bad album, but "Only God Was Above Us" is one of its best. The song-

ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS ERIKSSON

writing is less compact and urgent, and the sound is looser, hazier, more free. Koenig will turn forty this month. We all soften and uncoil, in different ways, in middle age.

I can't stop hearing the lyrics of "Only God Was Above Us" as a treatise on inheritance, decay, generational dissonance, and the delicate idea of choosing optimism over defeatist grousing. We have to reckon with the past: the cascading spiritual fallout of our ancestors' wars. We have to reckon with the present: the ghastliness of our current wars. But there's also a way to understand violence and struggle as inherent to the human journey—a challenge we have survived countless times (though not without sustaining wounds). The album opens with Koenig singing, "Fuck the world," his voice soft, almost trembling. But it turns out that he's merely quoting someone who's got himself mired in a self-fulfilling fear spiral. That song, "Ice Cream Piano" (on the lyric sheet, the titular phrase appears as "In dreams, I scream piano"), is noisy but buoyant. "We're all the sons and daughters / Of vampires who drained the Old World's necks," Koenig, a descendant of Romanian and Hungarian immigrants, sings.

Koenig is a meticulous lyricist, not one of those say-any-old-thing types. He favors harsh, distinctive nouns (horchata, balaclava, pincher crabs, aranciata, Masada—and that's just on one song, "Horchata," off "Contra"), and he often has to do some major syllabic gymnastics to make the rhythm work, like in this part of "Ice Cream Piano": "You talk of Serbians / Whisper Kosovar Albanians / The boy's Romanian / Third-generation Transylvanian." He seems to be suggesting, albeit gently, that it's advisable to expand our historical understanding of conflict—that no bloodline is innocent, that righteousness is never totally earned, that war is constant. "Each generation makes its own apology," he trills, on the chorus of "Gen-X Cops," a whirling song built around a distorted slide-guitar riff that sounds buggy and possessed, like an insect careening around a porch light at dusk.

"Only God Was Above Us" is rife with semi-arcane references: "Gen-X Cops" is named after a Japanese action movie released in 1999, the cover of which will be familiar to anyone who haunted downtown video stores before the advent of streaming. Another song takes its name from a *New York* magazine cover story from 1996, titled "Prep-School Gangsters," in which the journalist Nancy Jo Sales bums around Manhattan with a crew of trust-fund dirtbags. On "The Surfer," Koenig refers to the construction of Water Tunnel No. 3, a New York City water-supply tunnel that broke ground in 1970 and will be completed, it's estimated, in 2032. (It was once touted as "the greatest nondefense construction project in the history of Western Civilization.")

My favorite track on the new record is "Capricorn," a big, hazy tune featuring a swell of synthesizers, piano, guitar, harmonica, and strings. Could just be because I'm a Capricorn myself—"Takes a while to warm up to people," "Motivated by duty," "Full-grown adult since age six," according to the astrology app Co-Star—but I found the song's final verse almost unbearably romantic. What's kinder than telling someone they don't have to work so hard? "Good days are comin' / Not just to die / I know you're tired of tryin' / Listen, baby, / You don't have to try."

The album ends with an eight-minute song called "Hope," of course. It inventories various wrongs an individual or a society can endure, then suggests that we'd better find a way to let our rage evanesce. It's a notion—surrender—that has come up for Koenig before. On "Ya Hey," a song from "Modern Vampires," Koenig sings, "And I can't help but feel / That I made some mistake / But I let it go." During the chorus, he wails, "*Ut Deo, Deo*," a Latin phrase meaning "To God, God." (The song's title feels like a reference both to OutKast's "Hey Ya!" and to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, marking perhaps the first and last time those things were so explicitly combined.) On "Hope," Koenig returns to the idea of submission. "My enemy's invincible / I've had to let it go," he sings. You can nearly hear the shrug. Control is a fiction. Justice might be, too. Or, as Koenig puts it, "The signatories broke the pact / The surfer sacked the quarterback / Your bag fell down onto the tracks / I hope you let it go." ♦

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THE THEATRE

THE OLD PINBALL

"The Who's Tommy" returns.

BY HELEN SHAW

The director Des McAnuff has lost the rock opera's original grip on metaphor.

It's been a long, wild trip since 1969, when the opening chords of Pete Townshend's "Tommy," written with and recorded by the Who, first blasted onstage. The band toured the genre-defying album—a seeker's rock opera in which a "deaf, dumb, and blind kid" discovers a messianic gift for pinball—for several years. Throughout the next decade, other artists took a crack at the Who's material: there was a ballet, a symphony, and Ken Russell's nutterbutter psychedelic film, in 1975. Then, about fifteen years after the Who had more or less put "Tommy" away, the director Des McAnuff convinced Townshend that, together, they could turn it into a musical. The result smashed onto Broadway in 1993. A whole bunch of folks won Tony Awards; certainly, everybody made money. So, thirty years later, here we are again.

Or, rather, we're trying to be *there* again. Which "there"—the seventies? the nineties?—may depend on your age. It will also depend on whether your "Tommy" preferences lean toward the rawness of the band's concerts (which the lead singer, Roger Daltrey, once referred to fondly as a "bum note and a bead of sweat") or toward Broadway's glossy, show-and-also-tell approach. *Is* it a good idea to act out the lyrics of a song about a mystical drugged-out prostitute? Responses will vary. Either way, now at the Nederlander, nostalgia is being delivered by brute force. Before this outing, I had never seen "The Who's Tommy" in a theatre, but when I heard the overture's guitar chords, hissing with cymbals, I felt a shudder of false memory. The sound designer Gareth Owen has added a recording of a roaring crowd to the performance's first few moments, and I found myself remembering stadiums that I'd never been in. But, yeesh, then the show gets going.

It starts with a long, breathless introduction, some of it enacted in slightly goofy mime, as the rock instrumental plays: during the Second World War, a welder (Alison Luff) and a Royal Air Force officer, Captain Walker (Adam Jacobs), meet, marry, and lose each other, when he's sent to Europe and shot down by the Germans during a parachute jump. McAnuff, directing his own show once again, three decades after the original, displays his finest moment of stagecraft here: the projection design (by Peter Nigrini) shows us the inside of a bomber bay, and a line of paratroopers deploys by dropping, one by one, through the floor. Back in England, Tommy is born, and the Air Force mistakenly notifies Mrs. Walker that the captain is never coming back. When he does eventually make it home, he breezes in, shoots his wife's new lover—don't bother mourning him; he immediately fades back into the chorus—and traumatizes his four-year-old son. (I saw Cecilia Ann Popp as the youngest Tommy.) Tommy's parents insist to him, "You didn't hear it / you didn't see it," inducing in the child a total psychic block—he can no longer sense the world.

The world then preys on the locked-in boy. Tommy's uncle Ernie (John Ambrosino) molests him when he's ten years old (I saw Quinten Kusheba, wearing one of the wig and hair designer Charles LaPointe's silliest curly wigs); his cousin Kevin (Bobby Conte) flings him into a garbage can. Tommy's older self, played by an oddly muted Ali Louis Bourzgui in a white turtleneck, croons beautifully to his ten-year-old body. "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me," he calls through a one-way mirror, like a Phantom of the Opera who has studied est. Kevin does, at least, put wee Tommy in front of a pinball machine, and the kid discovers his talent. The ensemble lifts his little legs so he seems to fly, and the first act ends with something that should have

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM STOTEN

happened from the start: the back scrim flies out, and we see what appears to be the house band, shredding like mad. Energy finally fizzes and pops; voices that have been restrained are unleashed. We're given a break from all the vibe-killing black-and-white projections as the lighting designer Amanda Zieve triggers weird spherical kaleidoscopic lights, which move and shimmer like warp cores.

Here, as elsewhere, the set designer David Korins has chosen abstraction for the key prop, the pinball machine, which is played by a black folding table with a glowing rectangle sticking up on one end. If you are, say, from a generation unfamiliar with pinball, you won't get much of a sense of those Carnaby Street whistles and bells. *Maybe old people used to play with tables*, the young will think. *They made do with so little.*

And this struck me as the problem throughout. The production, more a reanimation than a revival, seems to think that there's no point in showing us the pinball machine since surely we remember it. All the theatregoer will need is the reference, right? Nostalgia is a key element of many shows—that's basically the whole point of Broadway now—but it's ruinous if the makers are seeing a past that we aren't enthralled by, too.

McAnuff created this production last year at the Goodman Theatre, in Chicago, and chose new collaborators rather than the 1993 team: Korins instead of John Arnone; the choreographer Lorin Latarro instead of Wayne Cilento. But McAnuff seems to have asked them to stylistically point to those earlier artists' work so frequently that I felt I was sometimes seeing constraint rather than fresh creativity. Korins uses an innovative grid of flying neon lights, but beneath that the core geometries are the same. And many elements are presented like talismans, to the point of bafflement. Did Michael Cerveris, as Tommy, wear a yellow jacket in 1993? Then the costume designer Sarafina Bush *must* put one on Bourzgui now. Even Christina Sajous, playing the psychonautic sex worker, does a Tina Turner impression—probably because her character, the Acid Queen, was played by Turner in the movie.

Most important, the show's already bizarre storytelling suffers; perhaps McAnuff assumes that we'll be as familiar with the plot as he is. (He does cut a number, and it makes things less clear.) The need to pack a gajillion events into tiny spaces discombobulates the end of the show. Here's what happens in the course of four swift scenes: adult Tommy's senses are cured when his mother smashes a mirror; he attains immense pinball celebrity (sure!), employing his cousin as the head of his private pseudo-Brown Shirts; he abandons that guru-like status because a fan gets hurt; and he joyfully leaves the Big Life for home, where he is welcomed by his sexual-abuser uncle, his killer dad, his mirror-smashing mum, and his jackbooted cousin. (There's also a projection that reads "IN THE FUTURE," which, since we start in the nineteen-forties, would mean that Tommy's family is immortal.)

No one explains why Tommy's followers sometimes wear silver helmets; if you never learned from one of the story's earlier incarnations that Tommy encourages his acolytes to muffle their own senses, this production won't let on. Hassled by his fans' adulation, Tommy instructs his followers to go find truth for themselves. *Yeah!* I thought. *Don't fall in line!* But immediately thereafter, for the finale, everyone in the cast gets into . . . a line . . . and sings the ecstatic "Listening to You": "Right behind you, I see the millions / On you, I see the glory / From you, I get opinions / From you, I get the story." I get *opinions*? Tommy, did they hear you? Did you hear yourself?

Somewhere in the transition from concert to musical, Townshend and McAnuff have lost the rock opera's original grip on metaphor. A double album doesn't need logic: no one cares about surface sense when the music is moving your blood around with sheer noise and rhythm; everything can mean anything. But McAnuff and Townshend's dramatization insists we're watching a story that does make sense, and then refuses to create that sense. I kept returning to one question: Who is Tommy? He's more an abstraction than a character, really. Townshend once wrote that the name sublimed out of Britishness itself—it's been slang for an English soldier since the eighteenth century—but also out of his own spiritual yearning. It contains the meditative syllable "om," and, for many, the idea of a child drifting without senses will remind us of our shared, unawakened selfhood. We are all, Townshend's songs imply, living in that kind of dissociated illusion. What force will help us recognize the real? "Tommy" the album wants us to have our own ideas about this, and I've dreamed several in the hours I've spent listening to it. The music is still frequently beautiful: it asked me to look within, and to look without. But it certainly never told me to look back. ♦

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PLEASE RECYCLE THIS MAGAZINE

CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, April 7th. The finalists in the March 25th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 22nd & 29th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

.....

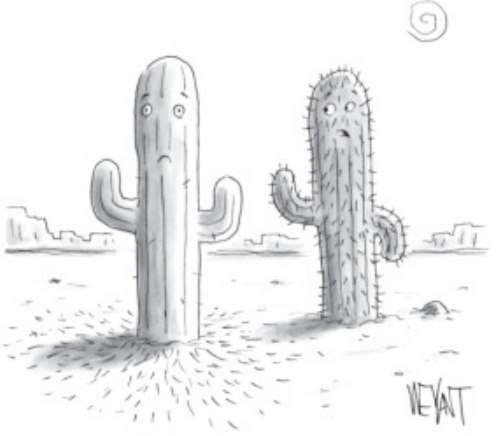
THE FINALISTS

“Apparently, in space no one can hear you ask for bread.”
Matt Nettleton, West Hartford, Conn.

“You could have mentioned that those photos were from thirteen billion years ago.”
Jake Phillips, Washington, D.C.

“Can I finish my drink before you suck all the fun out of this evening?”
M. J. McKinven, Ithaca, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“It doesn't make you any less of a cactus.”
Matt Cowhey, Beesley's Point, N.J.

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Conversations that change your world.

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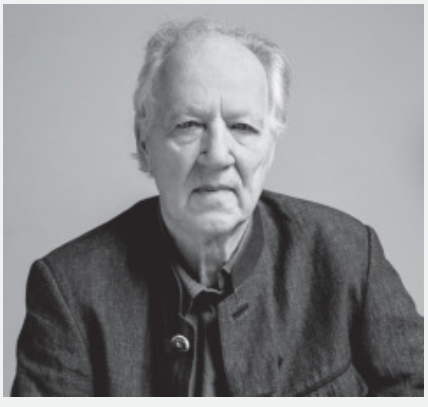

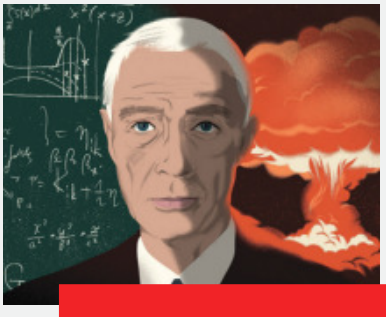

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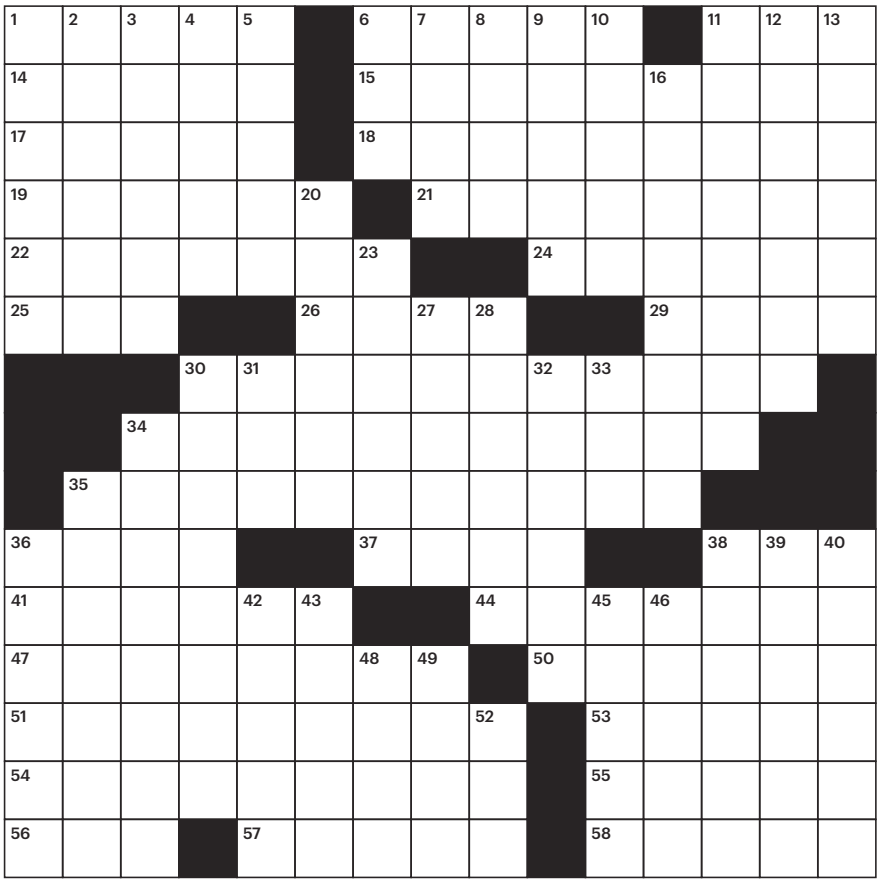
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY WYNA LIU



ACROSS

1 Sends unsolicited offers to, say

6 Prepper's pack

11 Greeting in Brasília

14 Sharapova with a 2–20 record against Serena Williams

15 Onetime features of the SAT

17 Accord

18 Yo-yos

19 Close again, in a way

21 Beer whose logo depicts Huilan Pavilion

22 Ingredient in a fancy mimosa, for short

24 Destine for, as a life of mediocrity

25 Lead-in to Marino

26 Faction

29 "___ there"

30 [Womp-womp]

34 Words accompanying a reality check?

35 "And I thought I'd seen everything . . ."

36 Christmas, in Chartres

37 Proofreader's instruction

38 Source of some wax

41 Gov't emissions-testing site

44 It might be punctuated with ". . . not!"

47 Group of fliers

50 Simple shelter

51 Person who might struggle with academic jargon

53 "The Dance Class" painter Degas

54 Only U.S. state motto in Spanish

55 Triangular landform

56 Sch. in Greenwich Village

57 Brawny dudes

58 Get in hot water?

DOWN

1 Cartoon characters who wear Phrygian caps

2 Bread chain

3 No longer in bed

4 Tick relatives

5 Request that might make someone stick out their tongue

6 Wander (about)

7 Handling the situation

8 Makes off limits

9 Freezing cold

10 "Anything but that!"

11 Fly in the ___ (minor irritation, idiomatically)

12 Recipient of a bequest

13 Half of A.S.A.P.

16 Piece of popular sixties footwear

20 Both, in Spanish

23 Volkswagen sedans

27 Produce with care

28 Labour opponents

30 Little fish in a big pond

31 Resident of a formicary

32 Only human

33 Projected pellets

34 Reassurance from a listener

35 Tree animals, say?

36 Nineties "Weekend Update" anchor Kevin

38 Wrist decoration

39 Property

40 Fusion genre that emerged from SoundCloud in the twenty-tens

42 First Hebrew letter

43 Important street in the history of Memphis blues

45 Components of accordions, bagpipes, and clarinets

46 Academy entrant

48 Mild Dutch cheese

49 Place for *une toque*

52 Made like mascara in the rain

Solution to the previous puzzle:

S	W	A	P	■	■	■	P	O	T	S	I	E	■	■
Y	O	G	A	S	■	■	O	N	W	A	R	D	S	■
S	K	A	T	E	S	■	D	E	E	P	C	U	T	S
T	E	S	T	M	A	T	C	H	E	S	■	C	E	L
S	U	S	H	I	T	R	A	I	N	■	P	A	P	A
■	P	I	E	C	R	U	S	T	■	D	O	T	T	Y
■	■	■	B	O	A	S	T	■	A	R	T	O	O	■
■	■	G	U	L	P	S	■	S	W	E	A	R	■	■
■	N	O	N	O	S	■	D	U	N	S	T	■	■	■
L	E	A	N	N	■	W	E	B	I	S	O	D	E	■
A	R	T	Y	■	C	E	L	I	N	E	S	O	N	G
B	F	F	■	M	A	T	I	N	G	D	A	N	C	E
S	E	A	P	O	R	T	S	■	S	U	L	T	A	N
■	D	R	O	P	L	E	T	■	■	P	A	B	S	T
■	■	M	I	S	E	R	S	■	■	■	D	E	E	S

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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The Daily

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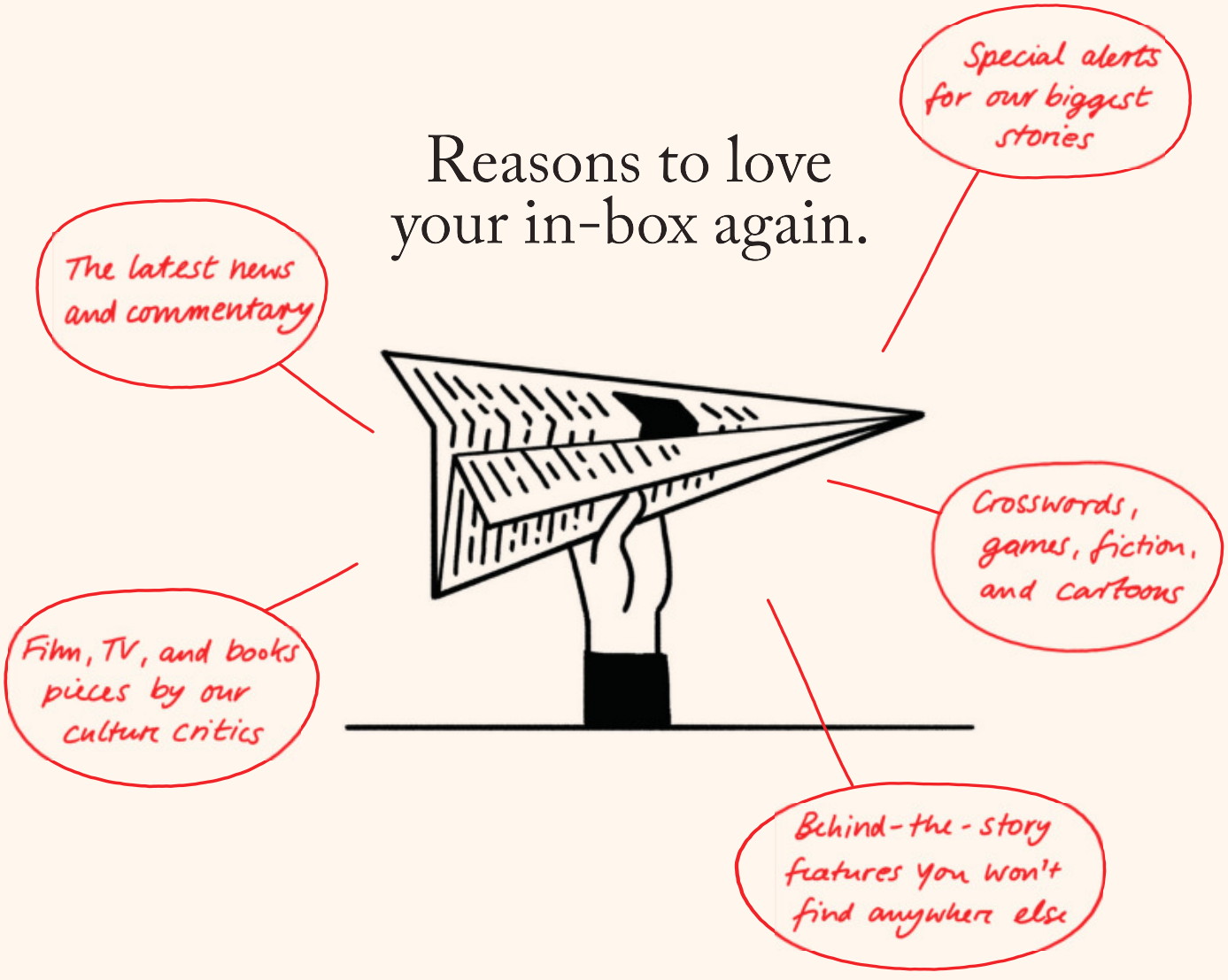
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